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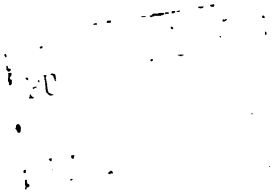

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FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

CHAPTER I

IT has become a trite observation that you cannot have a home in London. You live in London, but your real home is somewhere else, or you have not one at all.

In this sense Mrs. Gilmour and her family had always been homeless. They lived in the large house at a corner of a short road that runs out of Sloane Street, and they lived nowhere else. They were very well off, with everything they could desire, paying the modest super-tax of those happy days without distress, and yet they could not make themselves really comfortable: unconsciously they banished from them any imitation or transient illusion of the proper home feeling. There was an atmosphere of needless hurry throughout the house. Having nothing of importance to do, its inmates seemed invariably behindhand with their trifling tasks. They had no time to think. They omitted to shut doors behind them. They talked incessantly, in a running debate, about the little difficulties that suddenly confronted them.

Thus, for instance, old Mrs. Gilmour, opening the library door and leaving it open, announced that she was in trouble about the address of a friend.

"You can find it in the red book," said Emily Joyce, her married daughter, who was ensconced in an armchair by the fire and toasting her patient leather shoes.

"No, I can't find it," said Mrs. Gilmour.

"Oh, it *must* be there," said Mrs. Joyce.

"It's the book itself I can't find," said Mrs. Gilmour. "I think it may have been left in the car. Unless, of

course, I left it on the seat of some chair or other;" and she looked at her large and handsome daughter reflectively. "Emily, would you mind moving a moment?"

"My dear mother, if I was sitting on the book, I should know it."

Mrs. Gilmour had a talent for getting people out of their chairs; but Emily Joyce was always the last to get up, and she resisted now firmly.

"All right," said Mrs. Gilmour, for a moment looking baffled and worried. Then her mind wandered. "I haven't seen Mrs. Hackett this morning, and I know I had something particular to tell her, but I can't remember what it was. By the way, where's Claire?"

"In the morning-room, I think."

"Oh, yes. I thought you said at breakfast that we were all going to sit in the morning-room?"

"I'm coming there directly."

"Oh, now I remember," and Mrs. Gilmour's face lit up. "It was about the sweep."

"What about the sweep?"

"Mrs. Hackett said we must get the chimneys swept at the very first opportunity;" and she hurried from the room.

"Mother, would you please——" Mrs. Joyce called after her despairingly. But it was no use. Already Mrs. Gilmour's voice sounded on the other side of the hall, in conversation with the butler. So Emily had to get up out of her chair after all, in order to close the door.

"What are those dishes for, Belton? You don't mean to say that Mr. Cyril hasn't been down to breakfast yet?"

"Not yet, ma'am."

"Why, good gracious, it's quite late, isn't it? It must be nearly eleven o'clock;" and Mrs. Gilmour seemed as much surprised as if this was the first time that Cyril had come home in the middle of the night and lain in bed

instead of going to his work at the Temple next morning.

"Five minutes past eleven, ma'am," said Belton, sympathetically affecting surprise also. Then, following the footman with the tray of dishes, he disappeared through a red baize door.

Mrs. Gilmour moved slowly across the black and white pavement of the hall, and stood by the carved oak table, on which newspapers and magazines lay neatly ranged. For a few moments her face was overcast as she thought of Cyril, her beloved son. The dear boy's mode of life was, she feared, what Emily's husband slangily called "rapid." He was getting into debt, although spending such a lot of ready money, and she suspected that his extravagant habits were fostered by the friendships he had contracted among actresses. The proper place for actresses is behind the footlights. It is a misfortune when this barrier is disregarded, and they begin driving about in motor cars with members of the audience. If Cyril wasn't careful he might get his name in the papers. Then the expression of her face changed. Her attention had been attracted by a slight hissing noise that issued from the central-heating apparatus near the dining-room door, and she went and gazed at the tubes and joints. How pleased her late husband had been when he installed this useful machine! What a long time ago, too. How well it had worn. If there was anything wrong, it must be repaired without delay, if only out of respect to the memory of him who was gone.

Tender recollections of her husband brought into her mind thoughts about one of his investments, a block of leasehold houses at Finchley, from which she derived a part of her income. The solicitors had written again, reminding her that the term of these leaseholds was drawing towards its expiration, and advising her to provide against this eventuality by a sinking fund or an insurance. She refused to allow herself to dwell on so worry-

ing a subject. But the expiring leaseholds had reminded her of something else.

She was the sort of amiable, but not very wise, woman who puts trouble from her, refuses to recognize dangers, tries always to believe that what she dreads happening will not happen. She showed this temperamental reluctance even when called upon to face the inevitable; but of late, in regard to Claire, she had become unwillingly aware of the insidiousness with which time in its passage brings an annoyance and weariness nearer and nearer to you, whether you think of it or not. Her youngest daughter had grown up.

"It means that in future I shall have such a lot to do for Claire," she used to say plaintively to friends. Or, "That is something that must be postponed until Claire is married and settled." Or, when making plans with Emily or her adored Cyril, "It would only be possible if Claire were out of the way."

"Are you there, Claire?" she said, entering the morning-room and leaving the door open behind her.

Claire, a tall girl, with dark hair and pale cheeks, welcomed her shyly.

"What are you doing in here all by yourself, dear?"

"Only writing some letters," said Claire.

"I have an immense number of letters to write myself." And, as if the mental vision of the mass of unwritten correspondence had robbed her of energy, Mrs. Gilmour sat upon a sofa and stared at Claire hopelessly.

Claire was now twenty, and as yet nothing had been done for her. Next year she must be presented at Court and given a good time. That is, Mrs. Gilmour must take her to parties, show her the world; and presently, when Claire had shut the door and returned to the writing-table, Mrs. Gilmour spoke again of the [illegible] time. She sighed as she spoke of it.

"Oh, you musn't trouble, you know, mother," said Claire, gently.

"My dear, of course I shall trouble. It wouldn't be fair to you otherwise;" and she sighed again. "Only I am not as young as I used to be."

And she began to talk of her family with a curious detached manner, as though in no way accountable for the phenomena that she related.

"What was so strange, my children were so spread out. The nursery was always starting again. I had Nurse Mitchell back three times after we thought we had seen the last of her. Even the big rocking-horse was sold before you were born. Do you realize that John is old enough to be your father, if he had married at eighteen?"

John was the eldest son, who dwelt at Liverpool, and still followed the shipping trade, from which the fortunes of the whole family had first sprung; a nearly bald man, with a stubby beard and abrupt, swift speech; almost a stranger to Claire, and so different from Cyril and everybody else that she had sometimes forgotten him in her childish prayers, and been compelled, conscience-stricken, to get out of bed and add a postscript to the general petition: "Please God bless brother John too, and make me a good girl." His mother and others said of him always, "He will end by being a baronet"—much as one says of a hunting man, "He will break his neck before he has done."

"My little Lawrence," Mrs. Gilmour continued musingly, "was only five when I lost him. That nearly broke my heart, Claire."

"Yes, mother."

"The dearest little chap you ever saw—in a Scotch sporran. Emily was the next, of course. years older than you, isn't she?"

"And Angela, if she had been spared, would be twenty-three next month. This is February, isn't it? Of course. Twenty-three. You were very good to poor Angela, Claire—very patient and considerate—always willing to sacrifice yourself. But this won't do. How the morning is flying! You musn't keep me chatting here."

She had risen, and she looked at Claire at once vaguely and reproachfully.

"Can I help you in anything, mother?"

"No, my dear, thank you. There are matters I have to attend to that demand personal attention;" and she passed from the room.

Through the open doorway Claire heard her give a cry as though she had seen a ghost. It was the tardy apparition of her son Cyril coming down the broad staircase.

"My dearest Cyril, they are getting your breakfast ready. I will call. No, I will ring. Oh, they know you are down?"

Cyril, looking pallid and tired, came in and out of the morning-room, and his mother hung about him fondly. He lit a cigarette to encourage his appetite, sat at the piano, and vainly endeavoured to play a tune which, as he explained, was haunting him.

"Claire," he said fretfully, "you pretend to be a musician. Can't you pick it up for me?"

But Claire had to confess that, without the score and never having heard the melody, she was impotent to assist.

"I wish," he said, "they had taught me music instead of Latin and Greek. A dashed sight more useful to a fellow."

He was not hungry to-day, his breakfast was soon despatched, and after loud whistling for a cab, he was gone.

"Has Mr. Cyril gone?" asked Mrs. Gilmour, having mislaid him at the last moment.

"Yes, ma'am," said Belton. "Mr. Cyril has just gone."

"Oh dear, I wish I'd known he was going off like that. I know I had something that I wanted to ask him."

After this there was an unusually animated discussion between her and Emily as to whether they would go to the Army and Navy Stores before luncheon; or, if so, whether they would have the horses out and use the double victoria or go in the car.

"The carriage would be pleasanter," said Mrs. Gilmour.

"But the car would be *quicker*," said Mrs. Joyce.

The arrival of visitors automatically decided all points, and put off shopping at the Stores till after luncheon. A clergyman wished to see Mrs. Gilmour, and several ladies asked for Emily. These ladies were close friends of Mrs. Joyce or the house itself, and they drifted in from the street and out again quite informally on many mornings. They were elegant, richly attired, smiling, self-possessed; and up and down Sloane Street, and in the squares and crescents all round, there were hundreds of other ladies all outwardly and inwardly exactly like them. They told Emily and Mrs. Gilmour and one another astounding fantastic scraps of gossip: such as, that Mr. Arthur Balfour had long been secretly married to one of the royal princesses; that Mr. Lloyd George, the "dreadful man," had made a large wager that six named dukes would ask him to dinner before the year was out, and that ths bet had been duly entered in the betting book at the Reform Club, where a friend of the speaker had seen it; or that an Australian millionaire had taken the haunted house in Berkeley Square, and that his wife had had the bed clothes pulled off her three times in the night by "a presence;" or that Selfridge's new shop was selling rose-pink velvet curtains at one fifth of the cost of manufacture "as an advertisement." And none of these marvels aroused the least sign of incredulity. Emily Joyce

gave the hard little laugh that was habitual to her; Mrs. Gilmour nodded her head, smiled tolerantly, and sent Claire on a message; not even the curate protested.

"I shall run up to Oxford Street and secure some of those curtains," said one of the ladies, with a well-bred giggle. "There's no reason why we shouldn't profit by such a chance."

"I don't blame you," said Emily Joyce, with her hard laugh. "Somebody else will score, if you don't."

They all drifted out into the street again, except one of them; and next minute this lady was seated in the morning-room telling Mrs. Joyce's fortune with a pack of playing cards. Mrs. Gilmour stood by, watching and listening, with her head slightly on one side; Claire drew close to the table, fascinated, almost awestruck by the boldness of the sortilege; Mrs. Joyce puckered her forehead in strenuous effort as she sought to make the words of the soothsayer tally with existing facts.

"One, two, three, four"—the lady counted rapidly. "Yes, yes, yes. There is someone you love and wish to protect."

That, of course, might be Emily herself or her husband. Leonard Joyce was the junior partner of an eminent firm of solicitors, and she suspected him of having married her for her money, and merely taken her beauty and great charm of manner as a *bonne bouche*. She had not at this time of day the faintest notion of why she married him. She was quite satisfied with him for always "doing her well," although she scarcely made any pretence of being fond of him. She certainly managed his life for him, intending to put him into Parliament, push him along, and see that he grew richer and more respected. Yes, no doubt, the cards in their queer way meant to indicate Leonard as the thing she loved and desired to guard.

"Five, six, seven, eight. Yes, there's money. There's a lot of money—yes. But I can't say whether money

gained by speculation or money saved by putting-by. It may be money from a relative."

Mrs. Joyce frowningly considered. She and Leonard had let their house furnished at a good rent for four months, and by living gratis with her mother they were undoubtedly economizing. But "a lot of money"? You could hardly speak of such modest savings as a *lot* of money.

Mrs. Gilmour tested her luck next, and then Claire shyly asked if she too might have her fortune told.

"What fortune can she have at her age?" said Emily, in a tone of superiority that was almost contemptuous.

"Oh, let her try her wish," said the lady graciously; and Claire sat down to the table. "Wish, dear, and shuffle your wish into the cards, and tell no one what your wish is."

The room, like all the other rooms of the house, had been furnished and decorated at great cost, but without any real taste or controlling method. It was conventionally elegant, vulgarly charming; rich in objects of different schools and periods. A gilt chair with Empire tapestry stood beside a Queen Anne cabinet; a landscape by Leader hung between two Dutch mirrors; immense Oriental vases reflected themselves in the polished parquetry floor; and so on. Through the glass of double windows, filtered again by delicate lace curtains, came faint beams of sunshine. Two large shrubs of azalea in full bloom caught the soft sunbeams, while, weak as they were, the firelight faded beneath them.

And the small group of people in the room formed quite a pretty picture of the purely conventional sort—the fortune-teller, with her fur coat thrown open on her broad bosom her pearl necklace just perceptible, her jewelled bangles and rings flashing as she moved her hands; the old lady looking very dignified with her grey hair and purple velvet gown; the handsome, bouncingly

robust, young married woman lolling and smiling; and the tall, graceful, innocent girl leaning forward, with her pale cheeks faintly flushed, her eyes large and intent, her lips parted in breathless interest. Altogether it was just the picture that you might see at the Royal Academy any year, painted by one of our very best painters, and called "Opulence," or "Killing Time," or "A Modern Prophetess," or some other title easy to be understood by the public, and likely to please the critics and exonerate the artist from any suspicion of "pot-boiling" by its hint of good-humoured underlying satire.

"Shuffle again. Thank you. . . . Here's a stranger coming to the house. Five, six, seven. Yes, yes, yes. A stranger coming to the house very soon. Shuffle again, and cut as I told you. . . .

"Yes, there you are again, side by side."

"Which one is he?" asked Claire in an enthralled whisper.

"King of Hearts. You're the queen. Yes, he looks to you every time. One, two, three, four. Yes, there's the ring."

Emily Joyce laughed.

"There's opposition by a dark woman. There's admiration—eight, nine, ten. There's quite an extraordinary amount of admiration."

Emily Joyce interrupted. "Don't fill her head with nonsense."

"I'm only telling her what the cards show;" and the fortune went on. "You'll get your wish. Yes, it has come out every time. There; that's all. You may rely on it, you'll get your wish."

"What was your wish, Claire?" asked Mrs. Joyce, patronizingly.

"Oh, she mustn't tell her wish, or she'll spoil it."

"No, I won't tell my wish," said Claire.

The fortune-teller had fastened the clasp of her fur

cloak and was putting on her gloves. Emily Joyce asked her if she would not stay to luncheon; but she said she must hurry off.

"Did somebody say it was a quarter to one?" asked Mrs. Gilmour. "Really the morning has simply *flown*. And I haven't even looked at the newspaper yet."

The morning, however, had been normal rather than extraordinary. Mornings and whole days were passed in a similar manner. Moreover, Mrs. Gilmour, Emily Joyce, and their friends were typical of thousands of equally fortunate and prosperous people residing within easy reach.

All these people, both male and female, were well-meaning and at heart kind, but so far as their mental life was concerned they were without order or direction. Their ordinary thoughts were like little bits of dust blown about in a small room: never going far but often taking a long while to settle. They guided themselves no more in the fluid maze of conjecture and imagination, even when they fancied they were cogitating, than little corks or morsels of wood guide themselves when they float and dance on the surface of a shallow stream. Experience never helped them; memory always played them false. Responding only to external impulses, pulled about and to and fro by unrecognized irrelevancies, postponing all important decisions to the last possible moment and influenced then most of all by processes of digestion, doing bold things after a good dinner, feeling nervous on an empty stomach, speaking words of pessimism under the transient darkness of a bilious headache; and for these reasons performing the great acts of life in as muddled a fashion as the slightest, such people are, most strictly speaking, governed by chance.

And the misfortune is that if you are compelled to live with them, although your nature may be entirely different from theirs, you, too, are at the mercy of chance.

"Good gracious," said Mrs. Gilmour, putting down the newspaper as if it had stung her. "Is to-day the eighteenth? Then it's to-night that we have our dinner party?"

"Yes," said Emily Joyce. "Had you forgotten, mother? You don't mean to say you haven't ordered dinner?"

No, that was all right. Mrs. Gilmour had settled the menu with the housekeeper two days ago; but she now began to hunt for something in drawers and desks, reciting names the while. "Old Sir Kenelm Grantley—*he* is coming, and that Evan Giles; and the Drysdales are coming—and the Pirbrights—and old Sir Kenelm, of course."

"You said old Sir Kenelm before."

"Did I? It is very confusing——"

"But you made a list, I suppose?"

"Naturally I made a list. But I have lost the list. I should have thought that was obvious."

After more hunting and counting, she confessed that what hitherto had been a fear was now a certainty. They would be thirteen at dinner.

"Very well," said Emily, "then Claire must be left out of it."

"You are sure that Leonard will be with us?"

"Quite," said Emily.

So it was at once arranged that, instead of attending the dinner party, Claire should be sent to the theatre with her aunt Agnes; and Claire was delighted. Aunt Agnes, who lived round the corner in Hans Place, proved available for the evening, and Claire felt very happy.

But their troubles were not over, and luncheon was a flustered and uncomfortable meal. Mrs. Hackett, the housekeeper, hovering round them, declared herself positive that sixteen people were coming. Mrs. Gilmour had said so distinctly.

"If I said it I meant it."

"You did say it, ma'am," said Mrs. Hackett, with great firmness.

"Then you may depend upon it," said Mrs. Gilmour, "we *are* sixteen;" and shortly afterwards she gave a cry of triumph. "Miss Fergusson and her brother! Those were the two that had escaped me." And, counting rapidly, she made the company to number sixteen, including Claire.

Claire must, of course, dine with them; she could not absent herself from her mother's table without cause; it would not be proper for her to do so. A message was therefore sent to Aunt Agnes cancelling the theatre engagement, and Claire felt disappointed.

After luncheon two blows fell upon them in rapid succession. A telegram from Colonel Pirbright announced with regret that his wife was ill, and both she and he must beg to be excused.

"How many are we now?" said Mrs. Gilmour.

"Why, fourteen, of course."

"Then that makes no difference to you, Claire. You remain with us, dear. Oh, will somebody attend to that hateful telephone? Claire, run and stop it. The servants are all at their dinner."

Claire, returning from the telephone, had to tell them that the message was from Leonard Joyce. He was very sorry, but unexpected papers would detain him at the office till a late hour.

"Then we *are* thirteen after all," said Mrs. Gilmour, seating herelf forlornly on a chair in the hall.

"Bother Leonard," said Mrs. Joyce. "Then we shan't require Claire. She can have her theatre treat."

"What I think you had better do, dear," said Mrs. Gilmour, "is to get on your hat and coat, and go round to Agnes—taking Pope with you, of course—and explain exactly what has happened."

"Oh, I can't do that," said Claire, deprecatingly.

"Aunt Agnes might be offended. But don't trouble about me mother."

Mrs. Gilmour gave her a preoccupied stare, rose abruptly, and began to pace the black and white pavement. A nasty idea had taken possession of her.

"I do believe," she said, "that I have been led into the same mistake again, and counted old Sir Kenelm twice for the second time. . . . If I have done so, how many are we?"

"Why, twelve," said Emily. "That is, without Claire."

"Without Claire? What do you mean? I counted Claire. Do we require Claire or not?"

"Well, not if we are twelve."

"No, you're wrong. I mean, I'm right. It was Miss Fergusson's brother I'd missed. But, now, on my honour, I begin to think there's still somebody else coming. Stop. I make it eleven now, *without* counting old Sir Kenelm."

"Then that's twelve *with* him. My only suggestion is that Claire should be dressed and ready, and if she isn't required, well, I suppose it won't kill her to have her dinner upstairs in her own room."

"Oh, thank you, Emily," said Claire, with her lips quivering. "You are always so thoughtful and considerate."

"My dear child," said Emily coldly, "I am perfectly willing to stand out myself if you have set your heart on dining downstairs."

"You know I haven't."

"Or if you aren't ready to sacrifice yourself for the good of the community."

"You know very well that I am." And Claire went to a window of the morning-room and looked out at the street. She did not see very much of the street; for, in addition to the double glass and the lace curtains, she was stupidly allowing her eyes to be obscured by moisture.

It seemed that nothing could bring ease to poor Mrs. Gilmour. She was suffering from the well-known sensation of having a name on the tip of her tongue and yet being unable to utter it. She had opened every door on the ground floor and she passed from room to room counting, or keeping up a running fire of talk with Emily which became alternately irritable and sympathetic.

"You are *not* helping me, Emily. You go on chattering and merely perplex me. You give me no real help."

"Oh, very good," and Emily had the hardest of her laughs. "The rest is silence."

"I own I have been unbusinesslike this time. I am usually so accurate. I can only make us nine now."

"I wish you'd sit down, mother. You're simply wearing yourself out."

Then Mrs. Hackett, the housekeeper, came running down the staircase calling:

"I've found it, ma'am. It was folded quite small in the pocket of your amber satin."

It was the lost list, and Mrs. Gilmour and Mrs. Joyce stood poring over it unfolded on the carved oak table.

"There," cried Mrs. Gilmour triumphantly, "I *knew* I was right. There *is* somebody else. Mr. Roderick Vaughan."

"Who on earth is he?"

Mr. Roderick Vaughan was a friend of Cyril, and Mrs. Gilmour had never seen him. Cyril had asked that he should be invited.

"And Cyril himself not coming! Well, I must say," declared Emily, "that it's a tall order for Cyril to ask an unknown man like that and not be here to entertain him. How do we know who he is or what he is?"

"My dear, he's a friend of Cyril's."

"That doesn't say much," and Mrs. Joyce laughed again. "Anyhow we know our number now."

"How many are we?"

"Fourteen."

"With Claire or without her?"

"Why, with her, of course. Otherwise we should be thirteen."

Half an hour later they rolled away quite peacefully in the car. Claire had been upstairs, and when she came down to find out what was happening the car had just left the door. No one had sent her any message. They had gone without her. They had not known that she expected to accompany them, or they had not had time to look for her, or, talking together, they had failed perhaps to notice that she was not in the car.

Claire went upstairs to her bedroom again.

It was just such a young girl's room as one would expect to find in a house of this kind: lofty, and clean, and fresh; with well-polished furniture, bright cut-glass and gay wall-papers; with dwarf bookcases full of the books that are known as innocuous classics; with silver and ivory on the toilet table, framed photographs on the chimney-piece, a prayer book and a New Testament, both beautifully bound, within reach of the head of the bed;—with all the pretty things that one would look for as evidence of the care and affection that are as it were laid on in such households like the electric light and the hot water.

There was also a nice, chintz-covered sofa; and Claire sitting down on this, cried as though her heart would break.

Her mother was always amiable to her; Emily had the very best intentions with regard to her; in all her life no one had ever struck her or said a brutally unkind word to her; and yet, as the tears flowed in an unchecked stream, she felt utterly, abjectly miserable.

Her mother might have maternal affection for her, but she did not want her. No one on earth wanted her, or was really fond of her for herself. All mother's true

love was given to Cyril. The little that was left over had been absorbed by Emily. Mother liked to have Emily with her; but no one really and truly—not mother or anybody else—wanted Claire's presence or suffered from her absence. The warm flood of tears seemed to carry away with it the last torn fragments of her courage, her hope, her power to endure.

It was the dinner-party that had finished her. She did not wish to attend their dinner, oh, far, far from it; she was so shy that such festivities were still big with dread and torment to her; but their way of counting her into and out of the party had so fearfully "rubbed in," as Cyril would say, the sense that they held her of absolutely no account. It had seemed all at once to symbolize by little material things the spiritual neglect from which she was suffering.

Unlike her relatives, she possessed that wild, deep sort of inner life which must find its issues into and links of contact with external phenomena if one is to be at peace. She had imagination; the future with her was strong enough to make the passing moment often seem insignificant; the past was always vividly alive. To think of things was to see them. Her mind was a wonderful theatre, a palace of moving pictures, a whole world, too, of dreams and fancies. And she thought now, as she crouched sobbing against the lilacs and rosebuds on the chintz sofa cover, of things past, present and to come.

The pageant of Angela's funeral, the resurrection of the dead, the sound of her father's voice, the queer crackling noise made by the white veils of the nuns at the convent where she received her education, the play she might have gone to this evening, Nurse Mitchell sitting on a low chair rubbing her knees with liniment, the pensive expression of Aunt Agnes alone in Hans Place to-night—she seemed to meet the same inexorable logic in everything she thought of. Nobody was fond of her for herself, or ever would be.

Nurse Mitchell had grudgingly done her duty to her, holding her of less account than her brother and sister; the dear nuns had been kind to her, and fond of her neither more nor less than they were fond of all girls. That also applied to darling Aunt Agnes. If Aunt Agnes was fonder of her than of the other girls she was fond of, then it was because instinctive pity mingled with the love. Cyril, whom she had so worshipped years ago, had quite forgotten the old bond of tenderness between them. Mrs. Drysdale was awfully kind to her, but Mr. Drysdale was to Mrs. Drysdale what religion was to the nuns. Nothing else really mattered. Lady Grantley had been glad for her to go often to that house in Park Lane and read aloud. Yes, if she was useful to people they remembered her; but the moment the use came to an end she ceased to exist. No one had ever made a companion of her; and it was companionship she craved for so desperately that death seemed preferable to life without it.

The storm of grief passed, and because she was so young and so completely devoid of any accurate knowledge of human affairs hope returned to her. She got up and walked about the pretty room, discharged a gusty sob near the window, and another by the fireplace, opened one of her beloved books and dropped a large tear in it like a temporary book-marker, shook her head, pushed back her hair from her hot forehead, and presently had a wan, flickering smile.

She stood dreaming now, and her mind was as young girls' minds should be—a wonderful, airy, mysterious garden, with feathery branches of unknown trees and flowers of strange, surpassing loveliness, through and beyond which one catches glimpses of a golden landscape, towering heights and sunlit valleys, and immense distances—a place as innocent as the Garden of Eden before the fall—a place that you cannot understand until you have found your way into it.

"Oh, well, there," said Pope, her maid. "I see you've been having another of your crying fits. It *is* a pity the way you give way to them. But, if the truth must be told, I was just the same myself at your age. I'd begin all of a sudden, and then I'd go on—for no reason, you know, miss, but just cry and cry as if I was never going to stop."

With dignity as well as gentleness Claire indicated that these consolatory reminiscences were not needed, and she gave Pope some orders about her dress for the party.

In due course, then, Pope, minding her own business, dressed her mistress becomingly, and Claire went downstairs, paused outside the doors of the big double drawing-rooms, opened a door, and went to meet her fate.

If one could possibly use the word success in relation to such a gathering, one might say that Claire was the success of the party. Not a trace of all those tears showed around her eyes; there was colour under her transparent skin; and her small, white teeth were visible again and again in bursts of rippling laughter. Once she thought how wonderful and unfathomable life is; for she was thoroughly enjoying herself. And old Sir Kenelm, Mr. Drysdale, and other gentlemen thought how charming is the sight of a young, happy girl and what a pretty ornament she makes at a dinner table surrounded by dull fogeys.

"My little sister is quite coming out of her shell," said Emily, patronizingly but good-naturedly.

"I do love to hear her laugh," said Mr. Drysdale sentimentally; and then he beamed in the direction of his middle-aged wife, as if adding: "No disloyalty in that remark to *you*, my ever dearest. Your laugh is the melody that I love best of all."

Old Sir Kenelm simpered at Claire from his place of honour by her mother's side, and watching her while she

prattled and laughed, called to her presently across the table:

"Too bad of you, Miss Claire. I believe you are talking and making jokes about me."

Nothing could have been further from the truth. She was talking to Mr. Roderick Vaughan about Sam Weller's father, and the jokes at which she laughed had all been made by Dickens.

The new-comer had taken her down to dinner. He was a strong, well-built man of over thirty. He had brown eyes, full lips beneath a short brushed-up moustache, good teeth, and dark, close-cropped hair. He was very fashionably dressed, and the only man present who wore a flower in his coat. But Claire noticed these outward characteristics much less than the surprising and pleasant fact that he was so extraordinarily easy to get on with. He talked about everything in the same jolly, friendly way. He did not seem to know a great deal about books, yet obviously he loved reading.

"I am glad they let me sit by you," he said, dropping his full-toned voice, and speaking confidentially towards the end of the meal; "because you have been so kind to me. You know, I felt awfully nervous and shy when I arrived."

"No, did you really?" asked Claire, with enormous interest and growing sympathy. "Well, I am surprised! Really shy?"

"Trembling with shyness. Naturally—never having been here before. But, now, thanks to you, I feel quite at home."

"I'm so glad."

"I feel"—and his voice was quite low so that Claire had to lean towards him to catch the words—"I feel as if we were old friends—real friends."

"So do I," said Claire, leaning back in her chair again, and looking at him with her sweet, frank smile. "I feel

just like that. As though I had known you for *ages*."

Mr. Vaughan whispered no more, but for a moment sat looking at her in silence. His brown eyes rested contentedly on her slim white throat, the sharp curve of her chin, her sensitive, mobile lips. Then he laughed gaily and went on talking and eating.

He talked to her again upstairs in the drawing-room. He talked about her music. He did not know much about music, but he was evidently passionately fond of it. He begged her to play something on the piano, and seemed genuinely disappointed when she explained that it was quite impossible for her to do so.

"I'll play to you some other time," she hastened to add.

"But *when*?"

"Why, any time—when you come to see us."

"Then I *may* come?"

"Of course you may." And then she felt momentarily embarrassed, because she fancied she might have implied an assumption of proprietorial rights in the house that she did not possess. "I mean, of course, *I* don't ask people here. Mother does all that. But she and my sister both like seeing their friends. People are always coming—I mean, every day."

"Oh, I won't come every day," said Mr. Vaughan. "At any rate, not at first," and he laughed cheerily. And Claire laughed with him, because he had said it so funnily.

As soon as the last of the guests had gone, Mrs. Joyce suggested that Claire should not be allowed to sit up any longer. She herself was pining to begin with her mother the chattering debate that always followed a dinner-party. To-night, however, the discussion was spoilt by the return of Cyril. Claire, going upstairs to bed, heard him and Emily start a brisk quarrel.

"Who asked for your advice, Emily?"

"Perhaps not. But I think it's high time you got advice from somebody, Cyril."

And so on.

Three-quarters of an hour afterwards, when Claire was safe in bed reading "Pickwick" by the shaded electric lamp that stood near the prayer-book, Cyril tapped at the door and came into her room.

"Claire," he said, "I hear you did the civil to my friend Vaughan, and I'm much obliged to you, and have come to thank you. You were always a good-natured kid. What did you think of him?"

"I thought him very nice indeed."

"You did? And I think he's a very decent fellow myself. Anyhow, he put me under an obligation to him the other day, and as I don't happen to like shirking my obligations, I endeavoured to repay it by a little politeness. But, if you please," and Cyril snorted indignantly, "he is not good enough for my Lady Emily. No, he isn't quite quite. He laughs too loud for her ladyship. Heaven knows laughter is rare enough in this house, and anybody ought to be praised for doing it. And who's Emily, I'd like to know? Who are we, any of us, if it comes to that?"

Without doubt, short as Cyril had made the day by getting up so late, it had been long enough to contain events untoward to his wishes. His charmers had treated him harshly, his speculations had gone wrong, he was for the hour unhappy. He sat on the edge of Claire's bed, looking tired, discontented, querulous.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" And he brought out a cigarette.

"No, I don't mind. But I'm not sure if mother would like it."

"Oh, will she come in and see you the last thing?"

"No," said Claire, "she won't do that, but she might smell it."

"Hardly, I should think," said Cyril, lighting the cigarette. And then, between the puffs, he indulged in a

tirade against his family and matters in general. He said such violent, reckless things before he had done that Claire was quite frightened and shaken.

"Claire, I'm about fed up with it. One day I shall walk out of the house and never come back again. My father often said he'd do it. I shall."

"Oh, Cyril!"

"I can't stand this smug respectability. If I find myself happier in freer circles—artistic circles—I claim my right to join them. What's the family to me?"

"But mother! You know what you are to her."

"Nevertheless, if she cannot cut herself adrift from middle-class prejudices, separation must ensue. I'm not going to turn my back on my friends, or let ladies I admire and cherish be sneered at. Sneered at for what?" And he waved the cigarette with a superb gesture of lofty irony. "Because they are brave enough to earn their own living. Career at the bar. What's that but middle-class smugness? I'm not going to chew red tape and snuff dust for the rest of my life, in order to gratify Leonard Joyce, Uncle Derek, and the others."

"Why do you keep on saying middle-class, Cyril? We aren't middle-class, are we?"

"Of course we are, through and through. Not one thing or the other, without the boldness of nobles or the freedom of peasants—afraid of this, afraid of that—timid in our virtues, timid in our vices—doing nothing slap out—half and half people all the time—just damnably middle-class. Snobs, too! Arrant snobs. See how we try to hang on the skirts of the aristocracy, because my great-aunt happened to marry the second son of a peer—sucking up to all that gang—kow-towing to that old ass, Uncle Derek. So, I say for one, I'm precious near sick of it all. If they drive me a few more inches, I shall take my life into my own hands. I shall seek wider horizons. I shall say 'Good-bye, the lot of you.' I shall take happi-

ness where I find it, with those who can understand and appreciate me."

"But mother, Cyril? You simply *couldn't* desert her."

"She'd get on all right without me. She *thinks* not, but I dare say she'd settle down more comfortably, very likely, without me. Oh don't you worry, Claire. I shouldn't be missed, not for long." And he got up, stretched himself, and threw the end of his cigarette into the fireplace. "Now I have confided in you, because *you* are not a snob, and your conduct to-night has pleased me, and because we were always pals, weren't we? Good-night." And he kissed her with more apparent affection than he had displayed for years.

Then, the very last thing of all, when Claire was turning off the light, Mrs. Joyce came into the room. She looked very big and overblown in her Japanese dressing-gown. She had just finished talking things over in her mother's room.

"Claire, can you remember the exact words of your fortune? Didn't she tell you there was a stranger coming to the house, and he would admire you? A lot of admiration, wasn't it? Very extraordinary! Because Mr. Vaughan was an absolute stranger to us all, and both he and old Sir Kenelm paid you a great deal of attention."

In her love of the marvellous and her keen desire neatly to match the divination with subsequent events, she was reckless now about putting nonsense into the girl's head. She went away, murmuring, "Very extraordinary, I *must* say."

CHAPTER II

ALL thought of the queerly foreshadowed stranger, Mr. Vaughan, was soon banished from the mind of Mrs. Gilmour by strange occurrences on that shifting quicksand of accidents which she had crossed in her daily life for so many years.

On the afternoon that followed the dinner party, her old friend Sir Kenelm Grantley drove up to the house in his neat little brougham, presumably for the purpose of telling Mrs. Gilmour how much he had enjoyed himself over night, and to present to her the orchid blooms and the box of peaches that he had brought with him in the carriage. Mrs. Gilmour, highly gratified by these civilities, left him alone with Claire in the morning-room, while she attended to her presents ; and, engrossed in the amusement of watching Mrs. Hackett put the orchids in water, and Belton take the peaches out of cotton wool, she permitted herself to abandon the visitor for a considerable time, if she did not temporarily forget about him altogether.

"Ah, yes, indeed," said Sir Kenelm to Claire, "Isabelle was more than my better half. She was a saint, in the full meaning of the word. Not *narrow*, but brimming over with love and charity for all mankind. So patient too. *You* had many opportunities of seeing her patience and fortitude under all that grievous pain."

Claire had indeed been very kind to his poor dead wife, and he now went maundering on about this.

"The little friend with the light foot-fall! That's how I used to think of you;" and he smiled at her tenderly. "Oh, yes, I observed you—although not allowed to share in the sweet companionship. I used to listen to your voice,

as I stood outside the door, when you were reading aloud to her. I often wished to enter the room and peep at you, but would not do so for fear of appearing intrusive or troublesome;" and he took Claire's hand, and patted it softly. "You don't mind my dwelling on the past?"

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry for you—so dreadfully sorry."

She did not mind. She was full of sympathy. When Lady Grantley died it had been said that he would not live for more than two years; and Claire had taken a childish interest in this prognostication, wondering if grief really killed people, and why, if so, its lethal action was thus delayed. Why did it not kill at once? However, that was over four years ago, and here was Sir Kenelm still alive, looking no more feeble than he had always looked, smiling, and patting her hand till the gentle exercise seemed to fatigue him, and relinquishing it he began to cough.

"I only caught my breath, dear Miss Claire. What was I saying? Yes, I think you felt that the old house was a sort of second home to you. You knew that your presence there was looked for with pleasure. It is all just the same. Nothing has been altered. It needs redecorating, I dare say. I wish you would come and go over it with me."

Claire said very politely and sympathetically that if Sir Kenelm wished it she would be only too glad. She would ask her mother to take her up to Park Lane at the first opportunity.

"Yes," said old Sir Kenelm. "I will speak to your mamma myself. I will tell her my wish. I will tell her all my wishes. I must say nothing further to you, Miss Claire, till I have addressed her."

And by dinner-time this same evening it was known to everybody in the house, as well as to a good many people outside the house, that Sir Kenelm had made a formal proposal for the hand of Miss Claire in marriage.

Claire laughed when they told her about it. Really it seemed so monstrously ridiculous that she thought it was all a joke; but Mrs. Gilmour assured her that Sir Kenelm

was quite in earnest, and an answer must be given to him.

"The answer is in the negative, of course," said Claire, still smiling. "But I do wonder what on earth made him think of marrying *me*, of all people."

"Well, my dear, it seems that watching you grow up he has formed a very high opinion of your character. He thinks you are the only person he would really care to see queening it in the place of poor Lady Grantley. He has mourned for her long and deeply, but now, as I gather, he considers that the time has come again to admit brightness and gaiety into his life."

Claire had ceased smiling. Truly it was no laughing matter. She stared at the faces of her mother and Emily, and became almost horror-stricken; for she saw plainly that both of them considered the dreadful boring old gentleman to be quite a possible husband. A bitterly painful thought came to her: "*How* they must want to be rid of me, if they are ready to jump at such a chance as this."

Her mother had perhaps been as much surprised and nearly as much shocked by the notion as Claire herself, when their ancient friend opened his mind to them. But then she began to see the advantages of the plan. It would cut the knot of so many fast approaching difficulties. There would be no season to do next year, with its heavy task of chaperonage. Claire, of course, would go to Court on her marriage, and that would be her husband's business. If Claire fell into the plan, of her own free will, it would mean an escape from all kinds of trouble and weariness. But Mrs. Gilmour was very firm with herself when thinking in this manner. She said, "What I have to hope for is what will be best for Claire, and not what will be most convenient to me and others."

She said this to Claire next day, and repeated the same sort of thing day after day.

"I don't want to influence you either way—for or against. It is for you to decide."

"Mother, I couldn't. I simply *couldn't*."

"Very well, dear. All I say is, in justice to Sir Kenelm, it would not be kind to give too hasty a refusal, even if you have already made up your mind."

"Mother," cried Claire, "promise me you're not going to make me do it against my will."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Gilmour, with firmness. "That would be very wrong indeed."

Nevertheless she continued to brood upon the advantageous side of the proposal. From time immemorial she and the rest of the family had never spoken of the suitor except as "old Sir Kenelm;" but now it was to be observed that neither she nor anyone else used the invidious qualification when mentioning his name.

Emily Joyce was altogether in favour of the match, which, as she declared, many people would regard as a most brilliant one; and she made nothing of the disparity of the respective ages of husband and wife.

"I wouldn't say in *all* cases, but in *this* case I don't think it matters a straw," she declared roundly. "You see, Claire is such an odd, aloof sort of girl that she will never miss the sort of things some girls might crave for. She *likes* elderly people. Who are her especial friends? Who does she make chums of? Why, Aunt Agnes, Mrs. Drysdale, that Mr. Giles the writing man. Every one of them elderly. And Lady Grantley! Older than Sir Kenelm himself. I challenge you to name any girls or young men for whom she has ever seemed to show any partiality."

And Mrs. Gilmour agreed, forgetting, no doubt, that Claire had not been afforded many opportunities of showing pleasure in juvenile society.

"No," continued Emily, "Claire was born to be a nurse or guardian. It is an instinct with her to be moved quickly by the least feeling of pity; and all the more credit to her for it. She *likes* looking after invalids, taking care of little children, and all that. I have noticed her again and

again. If there was anybody here as a visitor who was lame, or in deep mourning, or looking neglected, Claire would always work her way round to them and as it were watch over them and try to make them comfortable. It was just the same thing the other night when that Mr. Vaughan came. Because she thought we were inclined to look down on him and treat him coldly she was all over him. You know what I mean? The slang phrase. Well, of course, with Sir Kenelm, that instinct of her nature will be thoroughly satisfied. Furthermore," and Emily laughed; "that argument of his age cuts both ways, mother, doesn't it? If Sir Kenelm is so old, he isn't going to live for ever. Which means that Claire will be left rolling in money and her own mistress while still a young woman."

She spoke freely to Claire of other material considerations in favour of Sir Kenelm. His collection of pictures was as interesting as valuable. And beyond the Park Lane house there was the place in Buckinghamshire where he grew the orchids and the early peaches. "Really beautiful gardens," Leonard says; "all in terraces, one above another. You *like* gardens, Claire."

But Claire was unmoved by arguments, or rather was frightened instead of being convinced by them. She thought of being the wife of Sir Kenelm without at all thinking of what marriage really means. She saw herself driving about in the pill-box brougham with him, fetching one of his white scarfs to wrap round his neck, reading aloud to him late at night, and did not even think of having to kiss him when they met at breakfast in the morning. Yet her thoughts were sufficient. She understood that she would belong to him. She knew that he would be her daily companion, and she knew that she could not bear it. So with tears she implored her mother to tell Sir Kenelm outright, and at once, that he must replace Lady Grantley with somebody else or continue to rub along by himself.

"Very well, dear," said Mrs. Gilmour. "It shall be so.

Now dry your eyes—and help me to look for my tortoise-shell card-case. The *way* things disappear from under one's very hands. Really as if bewitched. I had it a moment ago. . . . Oh, thank you so much, Claire."

Being always as good as her word, whenever she happened to remember it, Mrs. Gilmour duly delivered Claire's ultimatum to Sir Kenelm; but it was only to bring forth another unforeseen weariness to her. Sir Kenelm said he would not take "No" for an answer.

"Oh, no," he said gallantly, "charming young ladies must not be hurried, much less pestered, on such occasions. It is their privilege to claim unlimited time to make up their minds. It is all a new idea to dear Miss Claire, although one that I have nourished for a great while. Tell her to take time, and that I shall go on hoping;" and he sat in front of Mrs. Gilmour, smiling, simpering, nodding his bald head, while she sat staring at him with an expression of worry and fatigue.

"No, my dear old friend, it is no idle fancy with me. Assure our dear young lady that I am not angry or even huffed because she cannot at once gratify my wishes. I will wait—yes, quite patiently."

There was nothing about him either satyric or suggestive of the two apocryphal elders; he was simply idiotic. Although fully alive to the charm of the girl's youth and freshness, he had not a single sensual or unworthy thought. He too thought of the marriage as of a life-long companionship and nothing else. In imagination he also saw himself driving about in the little brougham with his young wife. He saw himself slip his arm in hers and take a little support from her as they ascended the stairs at Christie & Manson's rooms. He heard himself twaddling to her about one of the lots for sale—a real little gem—*The Haymakers* by Wackermann—panel—ten inches by eight. "Shall we secure it for our very own, Claire? Very well, dear. You and I will sit side by side over here looking very unconcerned, while Mr. Isaacson bids for us." Then

after hours spent in such pleasant bandinage and excitement, they would drive home in the brougham with *The Haymakers* between them, both of them holding it, both of them as happy as birds. All that he saw or heard in these imaginings was intensely enjoyable to him; and he was so completely incapable of mentally putting himself in another person's place that he could not for a moment understand that it would not all be enjoyed by Claire too.

"No, no," he repeated, smiling benevolently. "I do not dream of renouncing my suit; and all will come right in the end. If you will permit me to come now and then, I will not abuse the privilege. And I promise not to be obtrusive either, by asking for a *tête-à-tête* with Mademoiselle—unless she herself graciously suggests it. I will let time plead my cause."

Mrs. Gilmour, reporting the conversation to Emily, said it got on her nerves; but Emily avowed that she thought the attitude adopted by Sir Kenelm was rather fine.

"But what are we to do? If he persists, it will be agitating Claire to no purpose as well as being so wearing to everybody else."

During these weeks of doubt and anxiety Mr. Roderick Vaughan had come to the house once or twice, and Mrs. Gilmour had been too preoccupied to bother about him. He also brought presents—more flowers for Mrs. Gilmour, a box of sweets for Emily, and a book for Claire. His presence was a relief to Claire; she compared him with the silly old man, and the comparison was very much in Mr. Roderick's favour. The little compact of friendship that they had made at their first meeting was tacitly renewed or confirmed; and in several conversations with him, although naturally she did not speak of Sir Kenelm, she found herself talking of her thoughts and feelings with more freedom than she had ever yet attained.

One afternoon when her mother and sister returned from Woollands' spring sale, Claire was playing Chopin to him

in the morning-room. He leaned on the piano watching her face, her attentive eyes, her busy fingers; and their low-toned voices made an accompaniment to the slow movement of the nocturne. He sprang to attention when the others entered the room, and for the remainder of the visit was assiduous in making himself agreeable to Mrs. Joyce; laughing exuberantly at one of her facetious anecdotes, accusing her of cynicism, and even venturing tentatively and deferentially to chaff her. He succeeded so well that he was allowed to extend his visit till long after tea; and then, at the last, astounding as it seemed, he only went away in order to dress and come back to dinner. He had gained Emily's approbation, at any rate for one evening, by his brilliant suggestion that he should take her and Claire to the Palace Music Hall to see the wonderful new thought-readers about whom all the world was talking.

"You do like him now, don't you, Emily?" Claire asked her after the music hall entertainment.

"Yes," said Mrs. Joyce cordially. "I think he is a very cheery person, and *most* obliging. . . . Did you ever see anything more astounding than that man's reading of the post-mark on my envelope? He read it without a moment's pause. You bear me out in that? And the envelope had never been within sixty feet of him."

Henceforth Mr. Vaughan and Emily, for a little while, hit it off together extremely well. They indulged now in passages of open chaff, a rough-and-ready cudgel play of humour rather than the fine rapier work of wit, during which Emily became quite elemental, as was her wont when gay, and used such expressions as "Oh, go along; Yes, I dare say; I have been there before, thank you"—expressions which would have greatly surprised her, could they have been carefully recorded and submitted to her for consideration, when she had cooled down after her merriment.

Treated thus, not at all as a stranger but on familiar and easy terms, Roddy, as he said he was called by his intimates, aided with advice sometimes in the minor difficulties which each hour produced for the household.

"The only chance of getting the hat safely home," said Emily decisively, "is to send somebody to fetch it before Madame Alcide closes."

She was speaking of her own new hat, which she craved to wear to-morrow morning, and which would have been here now if Madame Alcide had kept her promise.

"Yes," she repeated, "the only possible chance. It's past five, and I believe she closes at six. But who can go? Claire, may I send Pope? Do run and tell her to get ready without a moment's delay."

"Who is Pope?" asked Roddy Vaughan, showing polite interest in everything.

"Claire's maid."

Emily was fond of sending Pope on errands, and, believing that Pope had insufficient work to do, often taxed her brain to find something which would keep Pope busy; but this was a case of urgency. She really needed Pope now.

Then, however, the question arose as to how to convey Pope to the bonnet-maker's. Mrs. Gilmour did not wish to disturb the chauffeur again. Yet if Pope went muddling round in omnibuses or failed to get a cab, the whole errand might prove a failure. Time inexorably urged her.

Roddy Vaughan was prompt with an offer of assistance. "I'll take her there in my taxi, and send her back in it."

"It's too kind of you, but I oughtn't to let you do it," said Emily, brisk and gracious as she hurried him out to the hall.

A minute later he and Pope were rattling through Lennox Gardens in the taxi-cab. She was a shapely and sufficiently well-favoured young woman of thirty or thirty-

two, and Roddy at once paid her a full-bodied downright compliment on her personal charms.

"Oh, really," said Pope, apparently neither scared nor offended.

"Yes, Miss Pope, that's a fact, as you know very well, my dear, in spite of your fascinating modesty. *You* don't run short of sweethearts, I'm sure;" and he laughed genially. "But don't think I'm going to ask you to add me to their number. Very likely I should have, in other circumstances; but just now, as it happens, I'm desperately in love with somebody else—your young mistress."

"Oh, sir, I don't know whether it's right for me to listen when you tell me things like that."

"Of course it is. I'm candid and open. I never beat about—always come straight to the point."

He had brought out his sovereign purse, and lamplight as they passed it showed him extracting one gold coin after another as though he expected to have a big bill to pay for the taxi-cab.

"I want you to put me up to all sorts of tips—to tell me all about her, and mamma and the others—the whole state of affairs—and to be quick about it. I swear you can trust me. My intentions are strictly honourable, and I'm beginning to worship the ground she treads on."

Importuned so earnestly, Pope told him at least this; that she believed Miss Claire had never been happy at home, and that she was very unhappy there now because they were all trying to make her marry a horrid elderly gentleman for his money.

"But they won't do it," said Roddy. "Not if *I* can help it. And not if *you* can help it either, eh? Remember, Miss Pope, on my word of honour, I'm not the sort that forgets the friends who give him a hand. No, I'm grateful, and I make it worth their while, if it lies in my power to do so."

CHAPTER III

"EMILY," said Mrs. Gilmour, "your aunt Agnes has sent me a rather silly letter. Somebody has been telling her about Sir Kenelm. I wonder who can possibly have told her."

"Oh, everybody knows. What does Aunt Agnes say in her letter?"

"Well, for one thing, she says she is coming round to see us. I must confess that I sometimes dread Agnes. She is so incurably sentimental, and in any argument with her I always feel at a disadvantage from the fact that she is still unmarried. One has to keep on remembering that although over sixty she is a spinster, and there are therefore so many topics that one cannot touch upon, much less discuss without reserve."

Miss Agnes Graham was Mrs. Gilmour's only sister, and their characters and temperaments were singularly unlike. Possessed of a modest competence, Agnes lived in her quaint little house in Hans Place, surrounded by prettiness, taste, order, and comfort. She was adventurous, fond of travel, always eager for new experiences. Although so quiet and ladylike, she was absolutely emancipated in all her ideas; she was not afraid of any facts; she had no prejudices, no religion, not even superstitions; but she was extraordinarily kind, believing firmly in love, and that this one short life of ours should not be wasted. She was devoted to young people, especially to Claire—much more so than Claire herself knew.

Her reputation for excessive sentimentality had been earned solely by the things she said concerning youth and love. She spoke at all times gently, almost caressingly; but, as the family knew well, she had often a downright

tongue, and on occasions could utter very sharp words with a very sweet manner.

When angry she never lost control of herself, but her bright little eyes used to glitter, and faint red patches glowed high on her cheekbones, almost as if she had dabbed them with a rouge pad. Both these danger signals were perceptible as she gently told Mrs. Gilmour and Emily that it was an impious shame to traffic with Sir Kenelm in young flesh and blood.

"What ideas you do get into your head, Agnes. Of course Claire isn't going to be forced to do anything against her will."

"Isn't she? I'm glad to hear it," said Agnes, in soothing tones. "But if you are tired of her and don't appreciate her, let her come and live with me. Give her her money—let her have the money to which she's entitled, and *I'll* take care of her."

"She isn't entitled to any money," said Emily. "No money at all till she's twenty-five years of age."

"Isn't she, Emily dear? But she's entitled to a just and proper *use* of the money, for her benefit. And the capital too, if she marries a suitable husband."

"Yes, if mother approves and consents."

"It doesn't look, dear, as if your mother's approval will be difficult to gain."

"I don't agree," said Emily, tackling her aunt in a matter-of-fact and resolute style. "As mother has told you, she has no intention of influencing Claire in favour of Sir Kenelm. Claire has said 'No,' and nothing will be done unless she says 'Yes.' But in my humble opinion——"

"Oh, I wouldn't call it *humble*, Emily dear. At any rate, you're always ready to give it to us, aren't you?"

"That may be so or not;" and Emily laughed hardly. "But my opinion is, for what it's worth, that from knowledge of Claire and all the circumstances she can't do better than accept Sir Kenelm's offer."

"But what are the circumstances?" And the eyes of Aunt Agnes were glittering. "Do you mean that Claire has fallen in love with the old monkey?"

Mrs. Gilmour made a helpless gesture. There you were. Sheer sentimentality. But, determined to bear with it, however fatiguing, she spoke tolerantly and placidly.

"Agnes, of course what Emily implies is that Claire at her age is perhaps not so competent to judge as are those with far greater experience and much older than she."

"Meaning you and Emily?"

"Emily winced and flushed; Mrs. Gilmour went on smoothly.

"Marriages made simply for love sound very attractive, when described in books and so forth, but does not experience show that they are often far from the happiest? Our parents made the match between Claire's father and me, and I will freely confess that I was not in love with him."

"No," said Agnes, "but you did not dislike him as much as you came to do afterwards."

Mrs. Gilmour gave a little cry as of pain, and then quite lost her temper. She said that Agnes had seriously offended her. She and the late Mr. Gilmour had been very, very fond of each other.

"Yes," said Agnes, with an air of pouring oil on troubled waters, "but you were glad when he was away, and bored when he was at home. Surely there must be something better in life than that."

But Mrs. Gilmour had been so greatly upset that it was some little while before Emily could restore her to her usual calmness. "He was a little exacting at times," she said, still heatedly, to Agnes, "but you may be quite sure of this. I could not do without him—and I don't think he could have done without me. Emily, you are not to believe there is the slightest true foundation for your aunt's odious taunt."

"No, mother, that's all right," said Emily. "I don't think Aunt Agnes always understands the double-edged character of remarks she lets fall."

Aunt Agnes smiled sweetly.

"Anyhow," she said, "you have both reassured me. Claire has been sacrificed all her life till now. She mustn't be sacrificed in this. You speak of my lack of understanding, Emily, and I am sorry if I am dense. But at any rate, I am not so stupid as to fail to appreciate Claire. She really mustn't be sacrificed. It would be too absurd—with that perfect nature of hers. And she's so pretty."

Involuntarily Emily sneered. "Yes," she said patronizingly. "I suppose she is—in her way."

"Yes, dear Emily, we know her way isn't your way. But beauty isn't necessarily measured by weight or size. The other day a young man was raving to me about her."

"What young man?"

"A very nice well-bred young man—Mr. Everett."

"Oh, that priggish person. Foreign Office clerk, isn't he? He has the regular Foreign Office manner. Leonard says they get it the day after they're appointed."

"Well, my dear, we can't all be solicitors, you know."

Aunt Agnes left them both in a ruffled condition, and hurried upstairs for a moment's talk with Claire. She said that lately she had not seen as much of Claire as she wished, and suggested that they should spend to-morrow afternoon together.

Claire regretted that to-morrow would be impossible, because she had arranged to pay a visit to Nurse Mitchell, and she did not like to disappoint the poor old soul.

"Then I must wait," said Miss Graham. "But don't go on neglecting me. Now I will run away."

Nurse Mitchell having done such protracted work in the Gilmour's nursery was now a pensioner of the house. She lived at Richmond; and as Claire was the only mem-

ber of the family who ever went near her, she had come almost to adore Claire, quite forgetting her own unkindness in the past, and believing that, as she said, Claire had always been her prime favourite. Claire, incapable of nourishing resentment, gave herself to the old woman's fancies, went to see her as frequently as possible; and brought on these visits baskets of grocery, a bottle of wine, a cake, which she purchased at shops, and so saved all trouble to Mrs. Hackett, Belton, or the cook.

Thus provisioned, then, with Pope in attendance, she went on the following afternoon to Sloane Street station, and almost the first person that she saw when she reached the platform was Mr. Roderick Vaughan.

"I'm off to Richmond," said Roddy, smiling. "Where are you going?"

"I am going to Richmond, too," said Claire. "How funny meeting you."

"How lucky," said Roddy.

And Pope looked as if it was all pure fun and luck, entirely unassisted by her.

At Richmond, Mr. Vaughan was very useful carrying the baskets, getting a fly to take them half way up the hill, to the row of cottages where Nurse Mitchell lived, and helping them out when they arrived at her door. He was so nice to Mitchell that he won her heart at once. In audible whispers behind his back, with significant nods too, she pronounced him to be a fine handsome gentleman, "more robust and solid-built than Master Cyril;" and to his face she related how Miss Claire had always been "the flower of the flock," her own favourite, and "able to turn Nana round her little finger."

Having polished off Nurse Mitchell in this satisfactory manner, he took Claire for a walk up the other half of the hill, along the famous terrace, past the Star and Garter Hotel, and into the park; with Pope demurely following.

"What a lark this is," he said gaily. "So jolly to be out of stuffy old London, if only for an hour."

He was gay and light-hearted, enjoying everything; and Claire enjoyed it all, too—the view of the river as it meandered whitely through vague fields and woods, the deer moving under leafless trees, dusk falling upon the grey valley, lamplight in the town, tea at a tea-shop, the crowd pouring out of the railway station when they got back to it again.

By that time he had told her heaps and heaps of interesting things about his bold and adventurous life; experiences during the South African war when he was serving in the yeomanry, wanderings in America, a wonderful trip to Peru on a commercial mission. He described what he had seen in very simple words and yet vividly; without any vainglory, although he could not deny that memories of crossing the Andes and examining the stupendous monuments left by the Incas, rather dwarfed the effect of Richmond Hill and the Star and Garter Hotel.

"Thank you so much," said Claire, at the railway station. "I have enjoyed it immensely." And indeed it was the happiest afternoon that she had spent for years.

"I shall see you home, of course," said Roddy.

"Oh, no, please don't trouble," said Claire. "Let us say good-bye here. Because I am sure you would rather go in a smoking-carriage."

But, as Roddy said, he could smoke at any time, when he was all alone, with nobody to talk to; and he did not intend to cut short a minute of this pleasant treat. He offered suggestions, in fact, that they should prolong it by returning to London via Waterloo, instead of taking the direct route by the District railway, and work their way round to Sloane Street from a distance. Claire, however, could not agree to these suggestions.

She was a little embarrassed, too, when he proposed to her before they parted that they should arrange for an-

other of these jolly meetings in the near future. He said that if she would let him know at what time and place she would be likely to be on any day, he could easily get there. For instance, if she was out shopping, either in the morning or afternoon, and had an hour or so to spare, they could slip off together for a stroll in Regent's Park, or go to the British Museum, or the Westminster Cathedral, or any unfrequented spot where they would not be likely to run into friends or acquaintances.

"No, I couldn't do that," said Claire. "It's very kind of you, but I know how busy you are. It wouldn't be right to let you waste your time."

"You know, surely, that I shouldn't consider it wasted."

"We shall meet at home, of course," said Claire; and he did not urge her any further.

Nevertheless, although she would not as yet make appointments with him outside the home circle, they met several times by accident. Chance seemed to be strangely propitious to him in the weeks that followed, and she and Pope came upon him in the most unlikely places. For a busy man, doing work connected with the Stock Exchange, he was much in the West End by daylight.

April had come now, more cold and blustery this year than the month of March, an east wind sweeping the skies at dusk as if with a fiery red broom that left its mark from the horizon to the zenith. In Hyde Park, everything was turning grey and indistinct as night approached; one heard carriages that one could not see; lamps began to show on the bridge across the Serpentine. There were still a few promenaders on the paths by the water; and along one of these paths Claire and Mr. Vaughan walked side by side, with the faithful Pope following at a respectful distance. To-day Claire had told him that he could meet her here. She had been to tea with Mrs. Drysdale in Cleveland Square and was on her way home.

"But I do trust you, Roddy. Why do you say that so often?"

"Because I love you so much, Claire."

"Really and truly?"

"I can't live without you."

As they strolled on they talked of their first meeting, of their incipient friendship, and of the marvellous rapidity with which it had ripened.

"But, Claire, you must never call it a *friendship* again, after to-day."

Then she told him of the very wonderful circumstances in connection with the fortune-telling performed by a friend of her sister. "You know, Roddy, I'm not like Emily. I honestly don't believe in fortunes by cards, or by anything else. I simply can't. And I don't truly think one ought to. But this is exactly what happened." And she described how their friend had instructed her to wish and not tell her wish to anybody. "Roddy, I was feeling so lonely and unhappy—without any cause, you know, because I had nothing to complain of. But I couldn't help it. And I wished that some one would be fond of me, and want me for my very self. Roddy, has my wish really come true?"

"Want you? I tell you I can't go on living without you."

"Then I shan't have spoilt the wish by telling it," and Claire laughed contentedly. "She said I wasn't to tell it—and I haven't, except to you. Do you remember, at dinner that night you said you were shy? But, Roddy, you'd never be able to guess how shy I felt. And then directly I seemed to feel that you were different."

"So I am. So I will be always. But never so different as you. Claire, there's nobody in all the wide world fit to compare with you."

"What nonsense!" And Claire laughed again, softly

and happily. "You mustn't say things like that to me. You must save them for Emily."

He slipped his arm through hers, and pressed close against her as they walked on.

"Now, Claire, my own dearest Claire, we may have a bit of a battle to fight, and you must swear that you'll stick to me through thick and thin."

"Through thick and thin. I swear it, Roddy."

"Your people may make objections. They're pretty sure to."

"Why should they?"

"They'll probably say I'm too old for you."

"Roddy, they simply can't say *that*."

"They'll say I haven't enough money."

"Well, I have a little money of my own, I believe. So that won't matter either."

"You darling girl! But take it from me there's sure to be opposition. We'll surmount it, all right. Only you've got to be brave, for my sake. They can't separate us if you stand firm."

"I'll do anything you tell me, Roddy."

Then he went on very earnestly, and made her repeat her vow to be true to him.

"In less than a year you'll be your own mistress, but of course they still pretend to some sort of power over you. If it came to a real row, we could just run off together. No power on earth could prevent us doing it. You see that, don't you, Claire? But naturally I want to treat your mother with deference and courtesy. But there it is, you have only to walk out of the front door and we can be married anywhere. All the relations in the world can't undo a marriage."

"No, I suppose not. Roddy, I must go home now. It's getting late."

"All right. But don't forget what I have told you, and that you have solemnly promised yourself to me. Re-

member, too, that I am always there, close at hand, no further away than New Bond Street. If there is a real crisis—if they bully you—above all, if you find out that they are plotting to take you right away where I couldn't get at you—why, then, just walk straight out of the house and come to me."

Then he wanted to kiss her; but she said it was impossible in this public place.

"You'd let me do it otherwise?"

"Of course."

He looked about him, and after a moment or two led her close to one of the big elm trees.

"No one can see us here. Claire, I must. Look for yourself. You can't see what those people over there are doing."

He had taken off his hat, and putting his left arm round her waist he drew her to him.

It was a hasty, evanescent embrace, and she kissed him just as she would have kissed her mother, as a child kisses; putting her cheek against his, and in her hurry kissing only the air.

But to him it was glorious, a delicate foretaste of the rapture that was coming to him. After parting from her presently, he walked eastward with triumphant footsteps, feeling larger, stronger, and more important than he had ever felt in his life; thinking that the chequered, up-and-down history of his existence was culminating in a splendour as prodigious as could be found in any last chapter of a fairy tale.

Before going home Claire looked in upon her Aunt Agnes at Hans Place, and they sat for a little while by the cheerful, crackling wood fire in one of the pretty little rooms that were always so pleasant and restful. Claire's large eyes wandered round the room, glancing at the chintz curtains, the lattice fronts of low bookcases through which the lovely readable books showed varied but gentle

colours, the row of framed miniatures, the palely-tinted engravings, the blue and white china in a corner cupboard; and she smiled introspectively. She was thinking that if she ever had a home of her own, she would wish it to be furnished in this simple style, with such modest, ordinary things as these, and not with the heterogeneous grandeurs of her mother's mansion.

"Claire," said Miss Graham, watching her face, "what has happened to you? You are full of new thoughts this evening."

"Am I, Aunt Agnes? Are you a thought-reader, too?" And Claire laughed and took Miss Graham's hand and squeezed it. "Yes, I have some good news that I wanted to tell you—as the very first person to hear about it."

And she told her aunt how there was now a man that she was fond of.

"Who?"

"A friend of Cyril's—Roddy Vaughan."

"And you really like him very much?"

"Yes, I do really, Aunt Agnes. From the very beginning I liked him a thousand times better than Sir Kenelm."

"But, you angel, you mustn't talk as if there were only two men in the world and your choice lay only between those two."

Seriously, even anxiously, she asked Claire a lot of questions, kissing and caressing her the while with great love and tenderness.

"It was sweet of you to come and tell me, Claire. And when are other people to know of it?"

"He is going to tell mother to-morrow—or next day at latest."

CHAPTER IV

RODERICK VAUGHAN had been at a good second-class public school; he belonged to a really good second-class club; and he was generally popular with the best sort of second-class people. He always dressed exceedingly well; he could ride, and play golf, billiards, and bridge, losing or winning like a gentleman; he went racing occasionally in a sportsmanlike genteel way; although not a member of the Stock Exchange, he was known to be connected with a firm of stockbrokers; and really that was about all that his friends, who were never of the closest kind, did know about him.

Sometimes one of them would ask another, "Who the devil *is* Roddy Vaughan?"

To which the other would probably reply; "Ask me something easier," or "I give it up," or "I'm not good at riddles."

"But he has expectations, hasn't he?"

"Oh, yes, now you remind me, I have heard him gas about his expectations. Coming into a baronetcy and a pot of money, according to his tale, one of these fine days."

Roddy's expectations were truly of a vague character. The person upon whom he based them was his great uncle, Sir Roderick Norton, an eccentric old fellow in Yorkshire, upon whom, much to his own annoyance, a baronetcy had been conferred more than forty years ago because of his wealth as a landowner. Sir Roderick's elder sister had been for ever banished from her family for very improperly marrying a groom on the estate, and the sole issue of the marriage, a daughter, was Roddy's mother. She, doing a little better than her banished parent, had married a livery stable-keeper in a southern town, who after pros-

pering for a little while fell upon evil days and presently died. Their only child, Roddy, would have fared badly at first but for the assistance of tradesmen relatives; and then the great uncle came to the rescue, providing money for the boy's education and maintenance to the age of twenty-one. But Sir Roderick desired that it should be clearly understood no further aid would ever be granted, and Roddy's mother subscribed one of those odious letters that are concocted by family lawyers on such occasions and administered to poor relations like an unexpected cup of poison just when they are beginning to feel hopeful and happy—a letter saying that she quite understood how Sir Roderick was acting out of charity, compassion, beneficence, and not at all because he recognized or admitted or countenanced any duty derivable from consanguinity, and how she was never to molest or suffer to be molested their benefactor with an attempt or pretence to establish any so derived claim upon his purse, leisure, or affection.

Roddy knew all about this letter, but, hating the memory of it, he usually managed to forget it. He certainly thought it was time it should be forgotten by Sir Roderick and everybody else. The passage of so many years should heal all wounds. The old gentleman, still unmarried at his very advanced age, could hardly have anyone "to look to" except Roddy; and there was nobody that Roddy cared to look to except him. Mother, grandmother, all were dead. On his father's side of the house he had only remaining, as prosperous connections worth thinking about, an uncle and aunt who were hotel proprietors at Hastings. They were fond of Roddy; and when younger he had spent summer holidays as a welcome guest at their hotel, livening the office with his gaiety, paying precocious attentions to the chamber-maids, wagering shillings against the billiard-marker, and altogether having quite a good time. Of late years he had rather neglected these kind and jovial hosts. On attaining his majority he had

written to Sir Roderick asking if he would care to continue the allowance; several times since he had written, asking if Sir Roderick would care to see him; and to all these inquiries Sir Roderick had caused a reply to be sent saying, "Certainly not." But Roddy felt that at any rate such communications, though sterile, kept him in touch with the head of the family; any day the old boy might have a fancy to close the breach; so Roddy continued to talk of his expectations, and being of a sanguine temperament perhaps believed half the things he said about them.

Perhaps, too, his dreams of future grandeur had prevented him from learning any particular trade or settling down in a regular profession. "*Pro tem.*" was a favourite expression of his; all that he did wos *pro tem.*—selling wine on commission, canvassing for newspaper advertisements, going to North and then to South America as a commercial traveller, getting mixed up with shabby little financial enterprises, drawing directors' fees from small moribund companies—in a word, living by his wits—but only *pro tem.* The most creditable episode in his adventures had been his African war service. Enlisting as a trooper in the yeomanry, he had been promoted to the rank of squadron sergeant-major, and before the war finished had been given a commission. From those distant military days he still retained a good carriage of the body, a swagger that to expert observers was a nice blend of the officer and the N.C.O., a capacity for roughing it that is only learned on active service, and the extreme distaste for doing so that is infallibly acquired at the same time.

Now, at the age of thirty-three, he was in more comfortable circumstances than he had hitherto reached. His half commissions and directors' fees enabled him to occupy lodgings over a hatter's shop in New Bond Street; never had he dressed so splendidly or possessed as many patent leather boots, white waistcoats, and glossy braided morn-

ing coats; socially he felt himself to be at the top of his game; but he knew that it was wise to consider all these comforts and amenities as things to be enjoyed *pro tem.* At any minute the bottom of his affluence might fall out again.

He was habitually successful with women, up to a point. He understood them extraordinarily well, again up to a point; their ways of thought, their love of mirth, their emotional concentration in the passing moment; and of all his appetites his appetite for love-making was the strongest and most insatiable. He never felt that enough was as good as a feast. When visiting a lady who had entranced him he would kiss the maidservant while the lady was out of the room. As soon as he had kissed a fair girl he was hungry to kiss a brown one. The substantialness of a big buxom wench in his arms gave him a massive joy after cuddling what is termed a threadpaper; but at the same moment he tasted in imagination the great pleasure he might experience from caresses with a middle-weight or medium-sized fairy. Sometimes he sank rather low in these unceasing heart affairs, taking his patent leather shoes and shining silk topper into very humble surroundings and very queer company; but on the whole he preferred or was more moved by refined, well-bred women. Something intrinsically common in his nature made him feel the sharp zest of conquest with the finer kind.

Thus it was not strange that he should be immensely captivated by Claire Gilmour, and feel now in his ecstasy of triumph that he had never really been in love before.

He had been taken with her at first sight. She seemed to represent all the things that he had always craved for and always been shut out of by unjust fate—gracefulness, delicate nurture, elegance of thought and manner; the prettiness that one associates with hothouse flowers; the sense of security and inaccessibility that belong to carefully-guarded and strictly-forbidden fruit. He was much

impressed by the house in which he saw her, its air of opulence, its lavish decorations, its velvet hangings and parquetry floors, its store of cut glass and silver, and even gold. Nothing in these splendours jarred upon his eye or offended his judgment; and before two minutes had passed, as he sat by her side at the glittering board, he had thought what a prodigious coup it would be to win the daughter of such a house, to establish oneself in the family group, and be classed henceforth as one of these well-to-do, eminently respectable people. It would be a soft thing for the rest of one's life; nothing could ever let one down again.

Then before the evening was over, and more and more every time that he saw her afterwards, the charm of the girl herself penetrated and subjugated him. The way she held her head, her sharp chin, the flicker of colour under her white, transparent skin; little tricks of manner, sweet little tones of voice, gracious little words that fell from her lips as perfume comes from the moving petals of flowers, obviously quite naturally—everything to do with her lured and excited him. Before going to sleep he used to lie in bed with his hands clasped behind his big, strong neck, throbbing with recollections of her; and if he did not dream about her when he fell asleep it was only because he never dreamed at all. He thought of her directly he woke in the morning. He astounded himself by the lofty thoughts that she had aroused in him. "What does money and all the rest of it matter?" he found himself saying. "Only love counts. I'd marry her to-morrow if I could, though she hadn't a single penny to her name."

He courted her diffidently, scarcely daring to hope, and afraid of venturing on the rough and ready methods that had served him in the past. Then when he seemed to recognize by infallible signs that he was making real headway, his desire and delight were unbounded, and he began "to brisk things along a bit."

But what was it that Claire the refined, the day-dreaming, the book-loving, could find in him to attract her? He asked himself this question, and shrewdly answered it with something not very far from the truth. She liked his debonair attitude to life, his brave if childish philosophy, his gaiety and laughter, and above all his air of comradeship and unfailing good temper. In all their intercourse he accentuated these characteristics, and was careful not to attempt thoughts and fancies that he knew were far beyond him.

Well, he was sure of her now. That slight, fluttered kiss was still making his blood circulate rapidly; her voice, as she echoed his words, still thrilled in his ears. "Through thick and thin. I swear it." And, strangely with the relief that came in the assurance of ultimate possession of his beloved one, there returned to him old notions as to the value of money. He did not feel that he was becoming mercenary again; but the fact of the solid cash seemed now to heighten the romance of the whole affair, to give to it that touch of glamour which one looks for in the best kind of love stories. It was still the girl he desired, and yet the material benefits that she might carry with her were certainly not any longer to be despised. They were the trappings of his victory.

He did now what he felt that a vulgar, thick-skinned, avaricious person in his situation would have done some time ago. He dropped in at Somerset House and studied the provisions of the will of the late John Richard Merling Gilmour. He wanted to know just how he stood before getting to work with the old lady.

Claire and the other daughters, it appeared, were to be given such a capital fund as would yield three thousand five hundred a year on their marriage if marrying with the consent and approval of their mother, and in any event on reaching the age of twenty-five years. So much was clear; but it was not so clear to Roddy whether the capital

was to be given out and out, or whether there was to be "rot about trustees," and so on. The wording of the clause was infernally complicated, and Roddy, thinking he would like to chew over it at leisure, had produced his pocket book and was beginning to copy the clause in his neat, business-like writing when the official in charge warmly reproved him.

"You ought to know very well," said this guardian, bursting with indignation, "that you're not allowed to do that."

"How the hell should I know?" said Roddy, so fiercely that the man was quite taken aback. "I'm not like you. I don't live here."

"Well, you know now, anyway," said the man grumblingly.

And Roddy went swaggering out of the building, feeling as light as air.

He had found out all that was essential. Three thousand five hundred—a most satisfactory income—more than he had anticipated. He expanded his chest, threw back his head, and spurned the pavement with boldly-swinging footsteps. Delightful, ambitious thoughts kept him company as he swung along the Strand.

With a sweet-tempered, highly-accomplished, widely-admired wife like that, there was nothing to which a man might not aspire. Success would be easy, failure impossible. He felt as if in winning Claire he had gone half way towards conquering the universe.

CHAPTER V

SOON it was known to all concerned, and to large numbers of people not in the least concerned, that Mrs. Gilmour had received a second proposal for the hand of her daughter, that she did not approve of this suitor, and that she was very much upset about it. Beautifully dressed ladies meeting one another outside shops in Sloane Street spared a minute to discuss the matter, among other astounding facts of transient interest.

"Emily Joyce says they are going to stop it at once. But what I wonder is why they have let it go on as long as they have. They sent Leonard Joyce to make inquiries —through detectives, I suppose— and it appears that the man is a sheer adventurer. But the girl herself seems hypnotized by him."

"Hypnotized! No, really?"

"So it seems. By the way, did I tell you what a man belonging to the Treasury told my husband? About Mr. Billow, the rich man, you know. He offered the Prime Minister a million pounds for his own pocket to make him a peer, and the Prime Minister took the money."

"No, really?"

"Yes," and the lady tittered and nodded her head; "but wait a moment. Without saying a word about it to anybody, the Prime Minister very quietly built an ironclad with the money and gave it to the nation. Mr. Billow was simply *furious*, going for him, and saying, 'What about my peerage?' The Prime Minister said, 'Well, what about your peerage?' just echoing the words and pretending not to understand. Wasn't it *clever* of him? Such a good score."

And then the ladies entered their shops and went on

with the business of life, thinking no more just then either of the hypnotized girl or the leg-pulling Premier.

Perhaps the only person on the Gilmours' visiting-list who remained in ignorance of the new turn of events now agitating their household was old Sir Kenelm Grantley. One afternoon when he came to pay his respects, armed with a pannier of large Buckinghamshire strawberries, he was almost hustled in the hall by a young man who was flouncing out of the house. The young man was splendidly attired but red in the face, angry of aspect, brusque of manner. He scowled ferociously, tramped past dangerously close to Sir Kenelm's gouty toes, banged the front door before the footmen could shut it behind him, and left the old gentleman tottering feebly with his strawberries.

"Might I ask who was your friend?" said Sir Kenelm to Emily Joyce, as she came into the hall also flouncingly.

"Oh, that," said Emily with decision, "was somebody you aren't likely to see here again."

Sir Kenelm was rather pleased to hear it. But he became conscious of the extreme unrest and discomfort in the atmosphere. Claire passed up the stairs with the rapidity of a slim ghost. Mrs. Gilmour, opening the doors, began to wander about as one who walks in her sleep. Belton the butler seemed unable to make up his mind what to do in regard to bringing tea. Emily chatted and laughed with the visitor, but had nervous movements of her hands and sudden jerks of the head. Sir Kenelm, without understanding why, felt that on this particular afternoon he had become distinctly obtrusive, and he meekly and rather sadly withdrew.

Of a truth the opposition that Roddy met with was greater than he had anticipated, and it appeared to be steadily growing in volume. The whole family had turned against him. No one had a good word to say for him. He had begun by talking very big about his expectations; saying that although, because of their contingent char-

acter, he could not bring them into settlement, they might fairly be considered as a set-off against Claire's inherited possessions; pointing out that he was the normal heir, asking them to whom else the old bachelor should leave his money, and assuring them that it would be easy to obtain a special remainder to the baronetcy, so that the title might pass to him with the property. He was longing, as he said, to take Claire to Yorkshire and make her known to his uncle. She would gain the old fellow's good-will before you could look round or say Jack Robinson.

But he was mortified by his failure to produce any softening effect upon them with these boasts. They made him angry by their insufferable airs of superiority. "They treat me," he told Claire, "as if I was somebody trying to rob a hen-roost."

At the very first, when he startled her with his confident proposal, Mrs. Gilmour had felt a weak temptation to say "Yes," and be done with it. If, as he alleged, Claire and he both wished to be married why not let them? It would be another road, a fresh short cut, out of all her difficulties. With cessation of worry showing plainly at the end of the new vista, she paltered and delayed at first, asking Mr. Vaughan to give her time and promising to think about it. But next day she told him, and Claire too, that it was not to be thought of any longer by anybody.

It was Emily who had said so; and as soon as Emily had made this decided pronouncement, with buring heat, Mrs. Gilmour felt strongly that Emily was quite right and that it was really her own decision. However tempting under certain aspects, it would not do.

Emily was, indeed, warm against it. "This," she cried, with scorn and anger, "is what we have to thank Cyril for."

Mrs. Gilmour naturally defended Cyril. "Cyril merely

made the introduction—nothing more, Emily. No, I blame myself for letting him have the run of the house. But the other thing drove him out of my mind; and you yourself seem to have forgotten the hint you gave me that first night he dined with us."

"Yes, because he began at once to throw dust in people's eyes. He has behaved outrageously."

Perhaps she was thinking of Roddy's obliging attentions to herself when she spoke of his dust-throwing tricks. Robust flattery was always pleasant to her, and although far too matter-of-fact ever to be led into the dalliance or sentimentality with which many married women of her acquaintance freely indulged themselves, it may have been that while remaining unconscious of the origin of her ireful emotion she resented the sudden loss of the cheery person who had certainly seemed to fall captive to her carelessly-exercised attractions. "I really must say very treacherous and underhand, since, as now comes to light, he was after Claire all the while."

Curiously enough, Cyril was no less indignant than Emily. Notwithstanding his often expressed disgust for old-fashioned prejudices, snobbish nonsense, and so on, he betrayed an arrogant displeasure at the mere idea that any member of his family should marry below the family level as judged by the most conventional standards. Moreover, he seemed to feel that his personal dignity had been assailed.

"If Vaughan had approached me," said Cyril, "as was his duty, of course, I might possibly have taken a different standpoint. At any rate, I should have thought differently about him. But no, without a single word to me, he has the consummate impertinence to make love to *my* sister. It was *I* who admitted him to the house in the first instance. He chooses to forget that."

"Well, we don't forget it, if he does," said Emily, with bitterness.

"In the absence of John," continued Cyril, ignoring the interruption, "*I* am the head of the family; and it is my intention to go to Mr. Roddy Vaughan and tell him so. I shall ask him to explain himself to *me*—and in all probability the interview will end by my punching his head or kicking him downstairs."

"My dearest boy," cried Mrs. Gilmour, "for goodness' sake don't do that. If there was the smallest *fracas* of that sort we should all find ourselves in the newspapers next morning. The one thing I am anxious to avoid is anything like talk or scandal. Nobody can help unless they do it with real tact. It is such a misfortune," she concluded plaintively, "that Derek Harpington should be staying down at Brighton just when he could have been so useful to us."

"You are not going to bring that old ass into it?"

But Mrs. Gilmour, gently chiding Cyril for speaking of him so disrespectfully, said that of course she had written to Uncle Derek for his advice. Equally, of course, she had written to her eldest son John. Uncle Derek was recovering from influenza, and John said that he would probably be passing through London in two or three weeks' time. She thought that John might and perhaps ought to have come up from Liverpool on purpose, and at once. "But you know what John is," she added, with a gesture so vague that it could not by any possibility have assisted in making her meaning clearer to anybody who did not know John very well indeed.

With such talk the days dragged themselves slowly by and surprised one by becoming at last weeks. Never had the house been quite so uncomfortable as now; even the servants felt the worry and annoyance that custom forbade them from openly sharing. And in the midst of it all Claire, nagged at by Emily, hectored by Cyril, pricked now and then with sharp words even by her mother, exhibited as well as patience and docility, a quite unexpected

stubbornness of purpose. She turned her large eyes from one to another in mute appeal as she listened to arguments or reproaches, seeming perhaps to say, if one might so interpret the trembling of her lips as she looked more especially at Cyril, "*Et tu, Brute;*" but she uttered no audible protest. When compelled to speak, she said very simply that she could not renounce Roddy because she had given her word to him, and that she had heard nothing up to now which could justify her in breaking it.

"Mother, I know what I should do with her," said Emily. "If I were you, I should send her back to the convent and keep her there till the silliness is got out of her. She could go on with her French and music."

But Mrs. Gilmour said she could not resort to such a violent measure, at least unless some man of the world like Derek Harpington counselled it.

Emily shrugged her shoulders and laughed with grating hardness.

"*Something* will have to be done if it is to be stopped. At present it is going on as if we were so many dummies."

"I don't think you ought to say that, Emily."

"Mother," she asked, on another occasion, "have you forbidden him the house or have you not?"

"Well my dear—no, not exactly."

"You said you meant to."

"I know I did. But I merely hinted that I thought he had better keep away. And for this reason, Emily; as I told you, I was anxious to get Uncle Derek's advice before taking *any* strong step."

"Well," said Emily. "He ignores your hint. He was here yesterday afternoon."

"No?"

"Yes. I've just found it out from Mrs. Hackett. He left the house only five minutes before you and I returned."

"Mother," said Emily, after breakfast one morning. "She is wearing that ring he gave her, and you said she

wasn't on any account to put on an engagement ring. It is effrontery. Open rebellion, *I* call it. Didn't you *see* the ring at the breakfast table?"

"I did not look her way" said Mrs. Gilmour. "Between you and me, I have tried to avoid any further passages between Claire and myself, until my hand is further strengthened."

She said the same sort of thing when Emily reported the presence of Roddy once more.

"He has been here again—while we were driving. I must say I think you should give Belton instructions to keep him out. Naturally Belton cannot act on his own initiative."

Then one morning Mrs. Gilmour came downstairs looking positively radiant.

"I have heard from Uncle Derek," and she flourished a letter before Emily. "He is *back* from Brighton, and quite well again. Writes from the Travellers'. As always, he assures me, he places himself unreservedly at our service. I never knew Derek Harpington fail one. So now, my dear, we can all put our heads together and quietly settle a definite course of action."

Derek was not really an uncle of theirs, but they gave him this title by his own wish, because of his age and the affectionate regard in which he held them all. He belonged to that noble family with which the Gilmours had connected themselves by marriage, and whereas they had perhaps been rather kept at arms' length by the remainder of these nobles, they had been adopted by dear old Derek as close and valued relations. At moments of excessive crisis or confusion Mrs. Gilmour always turned to him for assistance and support; and the late Mr. Gilmour used to say of him that he was "a gentleman in the best sense of the word"—an illogical expression which seems to convey a great deal to one's mind, although no effort of the imagination may be able to conjure up the picture

of what "a gentleman in the worse sense of the word" would be like.

Derek, in fact, was both kindly and unselfish, if not surprisingly brilliant of intellect; fond of his own clan to the remotest almost uncountable cousin, amiably inclined towards large crowds of human beings outside the clan, willing to take trouble on behalf of the merest acquaintance. Everybody liked him; everybody respected him. At club meetings when chairmen suggested that before doing anything formal they should approach their landlord in a spirit of fair play and give-and-take, getting some member of tact, experience, and recognized position to represent them, all eyes were immediately concentrated on Derek. And without hesitation Derek rose in his place and said, with a modesty quite unaffected, that now as at all times he was unreservedly at the service of the club.

He was now nearly seventy years of age; but if you had not known you could not have guessed it.

"Well, now?" he said inquiringly, when Mrs. Gilmour had ushered him to an armchair in the library, which was converted for this afternoon into a solemn council chamber.

"We won't be at home," she had instructed Belton.

"Not at home to *anybody*," Mrs. Joyce had added. "You understand, Belton?"

Mr. Joyce had suggested that the debate should take place in the dining-room, where they could all sit round the big table with Uncle Derek seated as president at the top of the table; but he had been over-ruled. From an unanalyzed association of ideas which made his motions scarcely more than reflexes, he had prepared pens, ink, and paper for everybody, and he was now busying himself about the position of the chairs, until sharply reproved by Emily.

"Leonard, for Heaven's sake, don't fuss. It's not a board meeting."

There were also present Cyril from the Temple and John Gilmour from Liverpool, luckily passing through London just at the right moment. No summons had been sent to Aunt Agnes; she was purposely left out. Without any voting into the presidential chair, it had been tacitly assumed that Uncle Derek would take command of the whole sitting, and unostentatiously he did so. He was employed on the helpful work that had become a pleasure as well as a habit of his life. No agenda paper, such as Leonard Joyce would probably have made out if given free scope, was really needed. The business before the council was so obvious; and it automatically fell into two divisions or main heads: (*a*) Analysis of the annoyance commonly known as Roddy Vaughan; (*b*) Question what to do about it. This was understood by Derek and all the others. It was also understood that at a certain point of the proceedings Claire would be called upon to present herself before the council. She had been warned to hold herself in readiness; and as members of the council took their seats to right and left of the presidential armchair they instinctively placed themselves facing the door of the morning-room, the door through which Claire would probably enter.

"See if she's there now," said Emily. "We don't want her to hear what we're saying. She wouldn't listen, of course, but she might overhear some of our words without being able to prevent herself."

"That would be a pity," said Derek; "for I take it that among ourselves we are going to speak quite frankly."

"Quite."

"But I suggest," said Derek, suavely and benignly, "that when Claire joins us we should be very careful in any thing we say before her concerning Mr. Vaughan. Words that wound and that one may so bitterly regret afterwards sometimes pop out if one isn't on one's guard."

Leonard Joyce had crossed the council chamber on tip-

toe. He opening the morning-room door, peered through it mysteriously, and closed it again.

"Not there," he said in a portentous whisper, as he returned to his seat. "Room empty."

"Very well, then!" said Derek; and there was a pause.

"You were saying?" said John Gilmour, and he scratched his stubbly beard and looked at his watch. Bald, rather short, alert and businesslike, he seemed very different from the rest of the family.

"I have carefully gone through all the notes and information with which you have favoured me," said Uncle Derek, at last opening the proceedings. "I think I have mastered them," and he smiled. "I have supplemented them by ascertaining a few facts on my own account. I don't want to express any opinion. It would not be becoming if I did so. Nevertheless it may be that I have formed an opinion."

"I expect," said Cyril, with a snort, "your opinion is precious like anybody else's. The fellow is an impudent bounder."

And Emily chimed in, making use several times of that ugly word adventurer.

"Don't interrupt Uncle Derek," said Mrs. Gilmour.

"Nay, nay," said Derek, "*I* don't want to do all the talking. I am merely here to help—that is, to bring out your views, and perhaps be of some small aid in collating them so that you can yourselves form a judgment on them. Suppose as a beginning you each in turn tell me all you know about him—all you think, and all you feel."

Mrs. Gilmour, Emily, and Cyril started talking together.

"No, please. One at a time," and Derek bowed to Mrs. Gilmour. "Will *you* begin?"

But Mrs. Gilmour, so voluble the instant before, fell silent. It seemed that the thread of her string of words had been snapped in the chorus of voices or her mind had suddenly wandered. She sat staring at the president

fixedly, gloomily, for a few moments. Then her face brightened, and she spoke with impressive force.

"Derek, I do not like him. I have thought it all out—for and against. I can assure you I have thought of little else during these last weeks—both by day and at night too. And it is all summed up in that. I don't *like* him. Nor can I see how any one can pretend that he is good enough for Claire." And she looked round almost sternly, as if expecting an attempt at this pretence from somebody or other.

Then Emily and her husband gave their opinions, Mrs. Gilmour presently breaking in again, so that the discussion became both desultory and repetitive.

"We come back to where we started," said Derek, after a considerable time had been thus spent. "Evidently you don't like him, Emily, any better than your mother. But, after all, we have only dealt so far with likes, or rather dislikes. We are not making much progress as to the reasons on which our feelings are based. That, perhaps, is scarcely fair to him. You will remember I suggested that each should say what we *know* about him as well as what we *feel* about him."

Then Cyril, questioned by Derek, related what he knew about Roddy.

"Fellows I know well know the fellow," said Cyril. "I'd known him by sight, and to nod to, and all that; and *he* makes out we stayed together in a week-end party at the Elephant Hotel at Pangbourne. But I can't remember ever exchanging half a dozen words with him, until he did me a service."

"What service?"

In the fewest possible words Cyril described a row that had occurred at a restaurant. "The lady I was with—I decline to give her name, Leonard—quarrelled with a lady at another table. And Vaughan assisted me and made himself useful in smoothing things over."

Emily laughed. "Then all we know of him amounts to this: Cyril made his acquaintance during a tavern brawl, and at once asked him to dinner at his mother's house."

"Nothing of the sort," said Cyril furiously. "Besides, you just go about calling the Paradise Restaurant a brawling tavern and you'll jolly soon land yourself in a thumping libel action, clever as you think yourself."

"I am competent to advise my wife," said Leonard Joyce, "as to any risk she runs in expressing her opinion privately or publicly, and I'll thank you, Cyril——"

"Gently, gently," said Derek.

"My dearest boy, don't squabble," said Mrs. Gilmour. "Emily, do restrain yourself."

Their recriminations, however, continued, and it was necessary for the president to call them to order several times before the hubbub abated. "We are getting very wide of the mark," he said suavely.

"Yes," said John Gilmour, "let us at least make an effort to keep to the point."

He had said very little, but he looked at his watch a great deal; and just now Mrs. Gilmour had implored him not to. "You have no idea how enervating it is to see you doing it. You make me feel as if were in the waiting-room of some great railway junction and missing all our trains."

The president looked towards him now.

"By the way, you haven't given us your views, John. What do *you* think about it?"

"Nothing," said John. "Never seen him."

He said it so briskly that it made his mother jump.

There was another blank pause, and then somebody proposing that Claire should now be brought before them, all agreed that the moment had come, and Leonard was sent to fetch her. He went into the morning-room, and presently could be heard loudly calling her name, like the usher of a court. Then he returned, and whispered confidentially:

"She's coming downstairs."

And they all sat looking at the door of the morning-room.

Then they all started and moved their chairs a little. Claire had come in through the other door, the door from the hall, and was standing on that side of the room looking at them.

Old Derek got up, and hurried to greet her and lead her forward. He kissed her, reminding her that she was one of his godchildren, gave her a little pat on the shoulder, and resumed his armchair.

Leonard Joyce had brought a straight-backed chair from the wall, and he carefully placed it immediately behind her.

"Thank you, Leonard; but I think I'd rather stand."

She stood there facing them, seeming when compared with themselves very pale, very slight and frail although so tall, and almost ridiculously young to be thus arraigned or called upon to defend her cause before this solid worldly-minded tribunal. But her firmness surprised them.

"Now, you know," Uncle Derek was saying, "I never interfere. Indeed how could I? My motto has always been Live and let live. I merely want to put certain considerations before you."

"Yes, Uncle Derek."

And he went on with great benignity to explain that all of them had arrived at the conclusion that she was in danger of making a great mistake. At considerable length he advised her to abandon the idea in deference to the desires of her nearest and dearest, or to postpone it so indefinitely as to achieve the same end as would be gained by abandonment. He assured her that later on she would thank everybody for preventing her from taking a rash step and that she would then recognize her existing predilection as really no more than a passing fancy.

"Well, now? What do you say, Claire?"

"He asked me to marry him, and I wish to do it."

"What makes you so sure?" asked Derek, in the kindest tone.

"He is fond of me. And I am very fond of him."

"But do you love him?"

"Of course I do. I have just said so."

"But you wouldn't do anything to make your mother unhappy?"

"No," said Claire, "I wouldn't do that;" and there was a little break in her voice.

"If we tell you that you're not to," said Cyril, "you jolly well won't."

Claire turned towards him at once.

"Cyril, kindly answer a question. Are you Roddy's friend or not?"

"No, I'm not. I *was* his friend, but I have ceased to be so."

"Then nothing you can say can have the least influence with me;" and she turned away from him, never looking at him again.

Soon they told her she could withdraw, and she left them to carry on the debate.

The debate was continued, but it became more and more repetitive in character. All were fully agreed that the marriage was impossible and that Mr. Vaughan must be made to understand this at once; the only doubt was as to the exact method of conveying the verdict to him. Clearly, Uncle Derek must be their intermediary; and everybody except John Gilmour offered hints as to how he should set about his job. There was a lot of chorus-talk, and time passed slowly but surely.

"Say we won't stand it," suggested Cyril; "and that if he doesn't want his head punched he'll give it up. I'll go with you, if you like, Uncle Derek."

"I should simply tell him," said Leonard Joyce, "that neither by birth nor fortune is he a suitable husband for Claire. He must see that himself."

Mrs. Gilmour was now walking about; and she talked as if to herself, only occasionally addressing members of the council as she passed them in her walk.

"The idea mooted by Cyril of *frightening* him as well as forbidding it seems to me to have something in its favour, Derek. But if so, it must not be Cyril to undertake it. He is the last person for such a task. You are too quick-tempered, Cyril. You would only lose your temper and bring us all into trouble by creating a scandal. Nevertheless, that people can be frightened in cases not very dissimilar to this I know as a fact, Emily. I remember perfectly—though it is over twenty years ago—how your father frightened a man who was paying improper attentions to one of the maids. He used to station himself outside the house hour after hour, and when the girl came up the area steps he, as it were, pounced upon her. 'Oh, indeed,' said your father when the annoyance was reported to him. 'Give me my stick, please.' It was the stick presented to him as a souvenir by that Waterford Steamship Company that afterwards went bankrupt. I dare say you recollect it, John. 'What are you loitering here for?' said your father, twisting the stick as he approached the man, and looking as if he had had enough of such nonsense—I mean, really incensed and indignant. You know how your father-in-law *could* look, Leonard."

"Tell him," said Emily, "that if he thinks he will get any money with her he is utterly mistaken. Not one penny till she is twenty-five. You may add that we all of us know he is a shameless adventurer."

Then John Gilmour intervened in the debate.

"Look here," he said abruptly. "Are you sure that you won't all give way and let him marry Claire in the end?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Emily. If there is any chance of

your caving in finally, there's no sense in making an implacable enemy of him now. You want to choke him off. I suggest that you should try to do it without grossly insulting him."

Then this new view of the situation was discussed. Uncle Derek seemed inclined to support John's suggestion. It was contrary to his instinct to be rude to people; he said that experience had proved to him that in nine cases out of ten moderation was advisable; and he made a classical quotation: "*In medio tutissimus ibis.*"

The remainder of the proceedings seemed to be strangely hurried. It was getting later and later, and the council generally were tired. Mrs. Gilmour, seated again, was yawning woefully, and explaining to Emily that the yawns by no means indicated waning interest, but merely the sinking sensation caused by the loss of afternoon tea. Emily asked if Belton had been given any orders about tea; and Leonard was told to ring the bell.

Meanwhile Uncle Derek recited what he now understood to be his final instructions. He was to do the best he could to "stop it at once." He was to do it with the greatest tact compatible with absolute firmness. He was to carry the thing through as only he could. He was to make Mr. Vaughan comprehend that it really would not do, and yet leave Mr. Vaughan feeling that he had received a compliment rather than a rebuff.

"And now, if you will allow me," said John, "I will be going;" and he looked at his watch. "Where is mother?"

Mrs. Gilmour, with Emily, was just outside the door of the council chamber talking to Belton; telling him to serve tea in the dining-room as quickly as he could, to add sandwiches to the usual fare, and put whisky, soda water, and glasses all ready on the sideboard.

"After all we have gone through, and the long delay," she said to Emily, "I am quite hungry; and I think a regular sit-down schoolroom tea will be very enjoyable."

CHAPTER VI

JUST as old Sir Kenelm had done, Roddy Vaughan refused to take "No" for an answer; but unlike Sir Kenelm's refusal, his was of a blustering, truculent character. Uncle Derek's mission had failed, but the dear old chap was not disheartened; he reported that he would try again, and indeed go on working helpfully until told to desist by the family themselves. He had succeeded in making Roddy swallow a part of the ultimatum, although not without indignant coughings and chokings on the part of Roddy. Speaking for the family he had forbidden Roddy to come to the house, and Roddy came there no more.

But however offended and angry Mr. Vaughan might be, he had no real fear that his intentions would be finally frustrated. Like Sir Kenelm he felt confident that everything would come right in the end. He would tire them out before he had done with them. At the worst, it was only a matter of waiting, with what patience he could.

He wrote to Claire, making sure that the letter would reach her by a safe hand, and adjured her to stand firm. "Be true to me, my dear one;" and so on. "Don't let them break your spirit. Remember I am always here, close at hand, your faithful knight."

Meantime Mrs. Gilmour's home atmosphere continued to be charged with worry and distress. Emily was always asking her mother troublesome questions. She asked so many of them that sometimes she made Mrs. Gilmour's head ache. Although none of us others ever saw Mr. Vaughan, was Claire seeing Mr. Vaughan secretly, on the sly? Ought not Claire to be watched? And Pope? Suddenly suspicion was aroused in Emily's compact and sol-

idly-moulded bosom concerning Pope. Should not Pope be watched? Was it not possible that Pope might act as a go-between?

Occasionally, as if in self-defence, Mrs. Gilmour countered or parried by questioning Emily. She did so now.

"Where did Pope drop from?"

"Drop from?" echoed Emily. "What do you mean, mother?"

"Where did we get her from in the beginning? She has been here at least four years. Did we get her through Mrs. Willoughby's Agency? Can you recall the date of the letter in which I told Mrs. Willoughby that I would never have anything more to do with her, after the disgraceful way in which she had treated me about that kitchenmaid? Was that more or less than four years ago? Pope didn't come through Mrs. Willoughby if it was less than four years. No, I mean *more* than four years, don't I? Which way would it be?"

Another question that she asked Emily with great solemnity related to Sir Kenelm.

"Don't you think, Emily, that I ought now to tell him what has happened? I don't like deception of any kind."

But Emily thought not. Indeed she was quite sure about it. She said that no deception was being practised. The Vaughan affair was theoretically over, settled and done with. On the other hand, Sir Kenelm had adopted the fine attitude of not being in a hurry, and wishing time to be allowed. His chances, in her opinion, were as good as they had ever been; and it would be against reason and common sense to go and throw him over or put him off by the disclosure of circumstances that he need never hear of.

"I should call that doing Claire a very bad turn indeed" said Mrs. Joyce emphatically.

"Well, you know I don't want to do that," said Mrs. Gilmour.

"I'll tell you *one* thing," said Emily, late in the evening impressively starting a conversation that worried her mother more than any previous confidential chat between them. "Whether Claire marries Sir Kenelm or somebody else, she will have to be *enlightened* a little, and honestly I think the sooner you have a talk with her the better. I mean"—and Emily had her characteristic laugh—"I don't see the sense of waiting to have the interview between mother and daughter that one reads about in French novels—the day before, you know."

"Oh, really I can't follow you, Emily, into such *very* delicate subjects. Nor do I think it can be necessary."

She tried to shy away from Emily's impressive forefinger pointing at her; she felt a reluctance that seemed to be almost religious so old-established was it. She had the strongest distaste for many dreadful new-fangled notions; and in her mind the topic of Emily's discourse connected itself with a group of kindred objectionable ideas—such as, The prevention of disease by publicity, Natural history lessons for children, The social rehabilitation of the fallen, etc., etc. But Emily was, as usual, resolute.

"Mother, haven't you yourself noticed how sillily she talks? Heaven knows the girls of the present day don't as a rule require to be told what o'clock it is;" and she described how she had been "frozen" by the free-and-easy talk of up-to-date girls, the daughters of her friends. "But Claire is different. Of course, being brought up by all those nuns—and I often wonder at father ever having had the idea, as she isn't a Catholic—may account for it; also the queer, secluded existence she has chosen to lead in this house amid all the gaiety and fun that has gone on all round her. At any rate, I'm certain I'm right." And she narrated how Claire had "blurted out things that she simply couldn't have said if she wasn't in the dark about everything." For instance, at a recent luncheon-party here, when somebody had spoken of immensely rich

people praying in vain to have children, Claire spoke of other people who pray not to have children. "'Equally in vain?' asked Colonel Pirbright, and I'm almost certain that I saw him exchange a wink with Mrs. Pirbright."

She went on to say that if her mother couldn't tackle it, she ought to get Aunt Agnes to talk to Claire.

"My *dear!*" said Mrs. Gilmour, extremely shocked. "A spinster? How can you suggest such a thing?"

Emily replied to the effect that what Aunt Agnes didn't know wasn't worth knowing. "In spite of all her treacly sentiment, I often think Aunt Agnes is the most go-ahead party I ever met. You should see the books she gets from the London library—Socialism, Psychology, and all the rest of it."

Finally she said: "I'd do it myself, only relations are now so strained that Claire and I are scarcely on speaking terms. I suppose, ordinarily, I should be the proper person to do it."

And Emily laughed, shrugged her shoulders, and went to bed.

At this time, although none pursued the course proposed by Emily, many people talked very seriously to Claire. Amongst others Mrs. Drysdale sought her out and told her a lot about her wifely affection for Mr. Drysdale.

"I dare say we make ourselves very absurd, and that people laugh at us for it," said Mrs. Drysdale. "But even at our time of life, both of us well past middle age, we cannot help letting it be seen how truly devoted we are. I just jump for joy when he says something nice to me, and he never misses a chance of saying nice things. Possibly, having no children has concentrated our love, but the fact remains we really are all in all to each other. Believe me, Claire, when he comes home earlier than I expected and takes me for a walk in the park, it is every

bit as big a treat to me as it was nearly thirty years ago when we were an engaged couple. We are such real companions.

"Marriage, Claire, truly *is* companionship. That is the key-note, the *raison d'être*, the true foundation of all perfect marriages. Now, do you really feel that your Roddy is the companion you will want always?"

And Claire said she thought she really did feel that. She felt that Roddy was the most companionable of all the people she had ever met.

Another person was Evan Giles, the writer, who came to tea one day. He had only a word or two with Claire, and to obtain these he manœuvred her into a recess of one of the drawing-room windows under pretence of examining a miniature that Aunt Agnes had given her. He was a tall thin man, grey and sad of aspect; and Emily complained that he always looked shabby as well as sad. But Claire admired and reverenced him, both because he was the only author she had ever seen in the flesh and because his earlier books were really very delightful reading.

"I have heard of your courtship, Claire," he said hurriedly. "The old saying is quite true, you know, that marriage is a lottery. Don't draw a wrong number if you can help it, Claire. Remember, it's for ever. There's no way out of it—no way that you'd be ever likely to find. And God bless you Claire, whatever you do." Then, speaking louder, he said, "Yes, that is very prettily painted. There were numbers of clever miniature-painters of the period, besides, Cosway;" and they went back to the others.

Later he talked of Claire to Mrs. Gilmour, not without adding to her fatigue by his eccentric turns of expression and his habit of generalizing rather than saying straight out, exactly what he meant. He was a "muddling" sort of man.

She herself often felt muddled now, especially at night. Under the worry and strain to which she was subjected she felt that she was in danger of losing that strong grip of a situation, that rapid logic, that luminous insight for which, as she considered, she had always been justly famous. Her thoughts while she lay trying to go to sleep seemed to be confusedly whirling in all directions; she could neither stop them nor make anything of them.

One night when the muddle was at its worst a sudden solution of her difficulties occurring to her, or rather flashing upon her apparently from nowhere, seemed in her excited and over-wrought state to be quite new and fresh. Why should not Claire marry Sir Kenelm after all? It would clear up the whole tangle; and its advantages marshalled themselves as a magnificent array. Perhaps Claire would change her mind. Perhaps she had changed her mind already. Girls have these choppings and changings and then perhaps from pride or reticence won't confess that their opinion has gone right round. She determined to sound Claire in the morning. But she could not wait till to-morrow. It would be so delightful to know now that everything was all right, and then sleep comfortably on the good news.

She scrambled out of bed, wrapped herself in her sealskin coat because she did not see her dressing-gown, hastily put on a large feathered hat to conceal the disorder of her hair, and went straight to Claire's room.

"Claire, are you awake? Do you mind turning on the light? It is so long since I have been in here that I have forgotten the position of the furniture, and I'm afraid of blundering into something. Thank you, dear."

Then she sat, almost jauntily, on the arm of the sofa, with her big hat on one side and elfin wisps of hair escaping while she expounded her solution of the problem. She was grievously disappointed by Claire's replies, and

her pose gradually lost its spring and became drooping and dejected.

"But you'll think about it Claire;" and although she did not actually beg Claire to marry Sir Kenelm for her mother's sake, she showed how Claire would immensely enhance the comfort of all her relatives by marrying him.

"Well, if it can't be, it can't be," she said dolefully. "I will merely ask you to think about what I have said. Turn out the light, dear."

Claire lay thinking about it in the darkness.

Next day was Saturday, and Mrs. Gilmour had booked seats for herself and Emily at Madame Clara Butt's afternoon concert at the Albert Hall; but towards the end of luncheon she expressed a doubt whether she would go to the concert. She said she felt worn out.

"I am not surprised," said Mrs. Joyce meaningly, and she glanced across the luncheon table at Claire. Then she continued, with an affectation of cheerful fortitude. "You'll be all right, mother. We needn't start early, so there's plenty of time for you to take a little rest."

"*Rest!*" said Mrs. Gilmour. "I think I have forgotten the meaning of the term;" and she stared at the ceiling, as though wondering if she would rediscover its meaning some day in impalpable regions high above the first and second floors.

"Oh, you'll be all right," repeated Emily. "I have ordered the car at a quarter to three and we can come away at half past four. It will be good for you." Then she looked at Claire again, and tried to speak in a tone of careless unsuspicious good-nature. "What are you going to do, Claire?"

"Nothing in particular."

"You are going to stay in?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I'm sorry we can't offer to take you with us, because we have only the two seats."

"Let her go in my place," said Mrs. Gilmour.

"Oh, no, mother," said Claire. "I wouldn't think of it."

"If it comes to that," said Emily with lofty indifference, "you can take her instead of me."

But Claire said no, of course not. She could not oust Emily, who was much fonder of that sort of music than she herself.

She was presently left alone at the table, and she sat there by herself till the servants came to take things away. Then she went into the morning-room, and as she stood by one of the lace-curtained windows looking disconsolately at the houses on the opposite side of the street, she heard her mother's voice close by in the library. As so often happened all doors were open, for Mrs. Gilmour had been prowling instead of resting. "No," said Mrs. Gilmour, with a sigh, "I'm afraid you are right, Emily, and that there'll never be any real peace in this house until Claire is out of it."

This truly was but a variant on many well-intentioned speeches that Mrs. Gilmour had long been in the habit of making when she spoke of Claire—such as, "That enjoyment must wait till Claire is happily married and settled," and so forth. Only to-day she left out all the softening adjectives and expressed the thought crudely. Moreover, Claire had never till now heard her mother emit so heavy a sigh as that which preluded the speech. The sigh and the words that followed took her breath away and left her gasping; so that she could not have intervened or in any manner have announced herself as being within earshot, had she thought of doing so.

"If," said Mrs. Gilmour, "It is to go on like this much longer, one of two things will happen. Either I shall break down under it, or, for the first time in my life, I shall lose my temper and be unkind to Claire. For, truly, the very sight of her is beginning to get on my nerves."

Claire pulled out her handkerchief, and hurried from the room. And as she crossed the black and white marble of the hall and hurried up the shallow steps of the wide staircase, the echo of her mother's words stabbed her again and again.

"Where is Miss Claire?" asked Mrs. Joyce at a quarter to three, when she and her mother came rustling down the stairs, both gorgeously attired for the concert in gay-coloured summer-like garments.

"Upstairs in her room, I believe, ma'am," said Belton.

Claire was in her room sitting on the pretty chintz-covered sofa, clasping her slender fingers tightly, looking with flooded eyes at all the graceful pretty things that surrounded her, and thinking as strenuously as she could.

She thought of the violent tirade delivered by Cyril that night when he had come in here to thank her for being kind to his friend; she thought of the contemptuous things he had said about snobbery and prejudice, of how he had threatened to go right away in search of freedom and wide horizons, because the narrowness of his life was stifling him. Those were his real sentiments; his recent cruel change of opinion in regard to her case had been occasioned artificially.

Above all, she thought of how he had declared that if he went away, their mother would not long miss him—not even *him*, the adored one. He was probably wrong in believing that; but how foolish it would be for a momemnt to suppose that she could miss anyone else, except, as she herself had said, pleasantly!

CHAPTER VII

ON this warm and sunny afternoon, Roddy Vaughan, having nothing better to do, held a sort of informal reveiw of his wardrobe. The lodgings that he occupied over the hatter's shop in New Bond Street were on the first floor; and they comprised a sitting-room in front and a bedroom behind, the two rooms communicating with large double doors. Roddy in his shirt sleeves, and smoking a pipe, passed backwards and forwards between the dark bedroom and the not very bright drawing-room, laying out and examining many pairs of trousers on the red velvet chairs, going to the window, and standing at one side of it to catch all the sunlight that was permitted to enter by the hatter's Royal coat-of-arms, a large plaster ornament very ugly to look at on this the wrong side, while he inspected the braided lapels of a morning jacket or the buttonholes of a white waistcoat.

"Come in," he called jovially, when his landlord tapped at the sitting-room door.

"A lady to see you, sir;" and the landlord, who had been a valet in private service, ushered the lady into the room with quite a grand manner and softly closed the door behind her.

"Claire!"

"I've done what you said, Roddy. I've come to you."

He was so completely staggered that he stood there, by the window, not even throwing down the white waistcoat or taking the pipe out of his mouth. Then his face flushed and the blood began to dance in his veins.

"Roddy!" She looked at him, and her lips trembled. "You did mean all you said, that you were really fond of me and wanted me?"

"My darling girl of course I did."

"If you don't, I'll go away. I can't go home. But I could go to Aunt Agnes, or to Mrs. Drysdale."

"Tell me all about it." He dropped the waistcoat now, came to her with coatless arms outstretched, put his hands on her shoulders, and kissed her. "Understand, I adore you. I worship the ground you walk on. Tell me everything that has happened."

"I've simply done what you said. I've come to you for good. I have thought and thought, and I know it's best. I am fond of you. I trust you."

"Claire, you're a tip-topper. I knew you were full of grit and courage—and you have proved it, with a vengeance. Now sit down while I think things out."

She sat on one of the dreadful red velvet chairs with her hands folded on her lap, and glanced about the room wonderingly. It was such a room as she had never entered before in all her life, so sordid in its vulgar attempt to seem luxurious, so repellent in its tarnished air of offering welcome to all comers; worse than the waiting-room at a cheap dentist's, because it smelt of stale tobacco, as well as of unswept dusty carpet. Roddy, pulling on his coat as he came back from the bedroom, was conscious of the splendid incongruity of her aspect in this place. She seemed to him like the princess heroine of a fairy-tale—and she had come here to give herself to him, the humble but glorious hero. Obtaining her permission first, he lit a pipe in order to calm himself. He must think now wisely and yet rapidly.

What should he do with her? He thought of different courses of possible action. Get a special license and marry her to-morrow morning? Take her straight back to her mother, playing the magnanimous, trusting them to be so gratefully touched by his lofty chivalrous conduct that they would of their own free will reward him with her

hand? Or hide her away somewhere, and treat with them from a distance?

What every drop of blood, every pulse in his body told him to do was to take her into the back room, smother her with kisses, and hang the consequences. But he must not do that. His conduct must of course be absolutely faultless. All the cards were in his hand now; it would be too absurd not to play them properly.

He asked her a few more hurried questions.

"When will they find out you have gone?"

"I left a letter for mother."

"Yes, but as you say she was out for the afternoon, she won't have got it yet. When will she get it?"

Claire looked at the little watch on her wrist. "In about an hour from now. They won't be home till half-past four at the earliest."

"An hour. Then we haven't any time to lose;" and he jumped up from his chair, went out to the dark and dingy landing, and called down the stairs to the landlord. "Mr. Mudge! You've got an A.B.C. guide, haven't you? Bring it up, please. And, look here, help me chuck a few things into the kit-bag—just a change—grey flannels. I shan't need my dress clothes."

He had made his decision. There was a place that he knew of in the New Forest, half farm, half lodging-house, belonging to nice respectable people. He would take her down there. The hunting was over, the tourist season had not begun; they would not be likely to meet anybody they knew. That was the wisest, most advantageous thing to do. She would be technically compromised. Her family would have no choice but to let him marry her on his own terms. He could command them; and he determined to carry the thing through with a high hand.

He came in again from the landing, clapped his hands, and laughed gaily.

"And you mean to say, Claire, you've come with nothing but what you stand up in?"

"I couldn't bring anything else, Roddy."

"Upon my word, you *are* a tip-topper. I never heard of such pluck. Just a little prize packet of all-right, inside and out."

The A.B.C. confirmed his recollection that a Bournemouth express left Waterloo just before five o'clock. He changed his clothes; Mr. Mudge packed his bag, and fetched a taxi-cab; and off they went. In the taxi-cab he laughed boisterously, cracking jokes and snapping his fingers.

"Claire," he said, "this is the most tremendous lark that the world has ever seen."

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. GILMOUR and Emily returned from the concert rather late, but in excellent spirits. Mrs. Gilmour had been spasmodically humming "Home, Sweet Home" all the way back from Kensington, and she was speaking of the simple little English ballad as she came up the steps outside her own door.

"*What* a voice, Emily! No wonder they encored it like that. Five times, wasn't it? Well, Belton, has Miss Claire had tea?"

"No, ma'am, Miss Claire is out. Pope wishes to see you, ma'am."

"Pope?" said Emily sharply. "If Miss Claire has gone out, why isn't Pope with her?"

"I couldn't say, ma'am."

And Belton retiring admitted Pope into the hall through the red-baize door. Pope seemed to be scared and nervous.

"What's the meaning of this?" said Emily, with increasing sharpness. "Why have you let Miss Claire go out by herself? You knew very well that unless she is with one of us it is your duty to go with her."

Pope eagerly asserted that she had wished to perform this duty, but Miss Claire had forbidden her. Miss Claire was "upset," but very firm. Miss Claire, she thought, had had one of her crying fits. Miss Claire had left a letter, to be given by Pope to Mrs. Gilmour. Here it was.

Mrs. Gilmour read the letter, began to shake and wave her hands then gropingly made for the morning-room, followed by Emily, and for once shut the door.

"Read it." And Emily read it.

"My dearest Mother,

"I have gone away to marry Roddy. I know you will not mind, except perhaps at first, and I am sure it is the best thing for me to do. I will send you our address soon.

"Claire."

Both of them very pale, both of them with tremulous hands, Emily and Mrs. Gilmour handed the letter to and fro between them, staring at each other and uttering ejaculations to which neither listened.

"That's all she says. . . . Not another word. . . . Run away with him. . . . Bolted. . . . Gone out of her mother's house like that. . . . Yes, she's gone. . . . What a thing to do. . . . Just bolted. . . . We must keep it quiet at all costs. . . . I shall die of shame if it's ever known. . . ."

"Emily, give me back her letter."

Mrs. Gilmour, suddenly stung to energetic effort, plunged out into the hall again, calling shrilly for Belton.

"Wait there, Pope. It's Belton I want, not you, for the moment. . . . Oh, Belton, the car! Order the car at once. It is no question of his getting his tea, I must be off now. I have to see Mr. Harpington without a minute's delay."

Emily had run to the telephone and was yelling for a number. Mrs. Gilmmour called to her to stop telephoning. "Ne dites rien à personne. Faut pas que personne sache la verité."

"Only Leonard," said Emily hysterically, coming from the telephone and leaving the receiver dangling. "I must have Leonard here. We can't get on without Leonard." Then seeing Pope, she turned on her savagely. "Now, Pope, I've seen through you some time, and you can just go upstairs and pack your box, and clear out, and——"

"No, no," cried Mrs. Gilmour. "What nonsense! How

absurd!" And she addressed Pope with a pitiable imitation of her own normal manner. "It is not *your* box, Pope, but Miss *Claire's* boxes that you have to pack—to send after her, you know. *You* will follow. *Etes-vous folle*, Emily? You understand, Pope, Miss Claire has had the idea of going into the country to friends of ours."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I am not expecting her back for a few days. Unless, of course, she changes her mind—in which case I should be very glad to see her, and you would unpack again."

Then Mrs. Gilmour started on such a pracing ramble through the rooms as they had never yet seen. Through the opened doors she passed like a whirlwind, and Emily ran here and there to catch a word with her in transit.

"Mother, only Leonard. He counts as a son. He can help—set the police in motion."

"Oh, will the car never come? How long am I to be kept waiting for the car?"

"Mother, what do you mean to do when the car is here?"

"Go in pursuit. I must rescue my child."

"Then take Leonard with you." And Emily dashed off to the telephone again.

"If you tell him, give him no particulars. It is Uncle Derek who must know the facts. Ring up the Travellers'. Tell Derek I am on the way to him now. I will pick him up and take him on with me."

Then when she was next passing, she fell upon Emily in sudden explosive wrath.

"Emily, I heard you saying the very words. Half the house could have heard you. You said the very words—'Run away.'"

"Only to Leonard, mother."

Mrs. Gilmour burst into tears. "It is you, Emily,"

she sobbed, "Who have brought this on me—mismanaging, obscuring my judgment."

"It's cruel of you to say so, mother;" and Emily began to cry too.

"You took me away just when I ought to have been here—the very afternoon she takes it into her head to do this madness *I* am carted off to the Albert Hall——"

"Mother!"

Then they embraced, and wept for a few moments on each other's necks. "Forgive me, Emily. I didn't mean it. Oh, where is that car?"

"It's all right, mother. I know you didn't really mean it. Let me put your hat straight."

And then, by the queerest of chances, Cyril drifted in. As a rule he was never here at such an hour, least of all on a Saturday.

"Oh, my boy—my poor boy. You at any rate are guiltless, for you never wavered in your dislike of him."

Quickly made aware of the catastrophe, Cyril dropped upon a chair by the central heating apparatus, and in a dreadful tragic whisper uttered his thoughts.

"The villain. The cursed villain." Then he began to shout for Belton.

"Did you call, sir?"

"Belton, where's that revolver that I bought when Mrs. Gilmour was worried at night by those cats from Number Nine?"

"I have it, put away downstairs, sir."

"Fetch it."

"Yes, sir."

And Cyril hissed through his teeth. "I'll kill him. I'll kill him at sight."

Mrs. Gilmour gave a moan.

"A duel! Oh, heaven forbid. Do you want to make me quite frantic? Don't you see that if there is a breath of scandal, your sister's reputation is gone for ever? A duel

—everything in the papers—when our one task is to prevent a soul from knowing. What you said to Belton is already sufficient to arouse his suspicions."

"If he wrongs her, I intend to kill him."

"Hush."

"Besides," said Emily, "he is just as likely to kill you as you him, if it comes to firearms. He was in the army."

Mrs. Gilmour moaned again.

"Where does he live?" asked Emily. "I suppose mother will go there first of all—that is, after the Travellers'."

"I know where he lives, but I can't think," said Cyril distractingly. "Bond Street. They would know at his club—but of course they might refuse to tell us. He belongs to the Junior Regent."

"Yes, that is where I sent that fatal card of invitation," said Mrs. Gilmour.

It was pitiful. This the greatest accident that had ever befallen the house was altogether too big for them. The colour seemed to be permanently banished from their drawn faces; all their hands trembled; as they looked at one another there was nothing to read in their eyes but confusion, impotence, panic.

"The car is at the door," said Belton.

They drove about in the car, at first three of them, then four with Uncle Derek, and finally five counting Leonard Joyce. Not without delay and difficulty Derek enabled them to get Roddy's address from the club porter; and at last, having left the car round the corner, they stood outside the hatter's closely shuttered shop and feverishly pressed the bell button at the side door.

The birds had long since flown.

Mr. Mudge, the landlord, could not say where. He did not know what would be Mr. Vaughan's next address. He had instructions to take Mr. Vaughan's letters down to the club, and doubtless Mr. Vaughan would write to

the club and ask for them if he wanted them. Mr. Mudge, cross-examined, even threatened, by Leonard Joyce, could not or would not tell them anything more than that.

Considerably past eight o'clock, Belton with his assistants served dinner to them, stanchly maintaining his polite pretence that nothing unusual had happened or was happening. But they were all of them still in morning dress, and no circumstance could have typified more strongly the violent break in custom, the catastrophic upheaval that the house had suffered. They all ate heartily because the stress of their emotions had made them very hungry, and some of them, moreover, had missed their afternoon tea. When dessert had been put on the table and the servants had gone to fetch the coffee old Derek did his very best to sustain the courage of his courtesy nephews and nieces.

"My experience leads me on occasions like this always to say the same thing. Incidents that seem alarming in the beginning often take a better turn before they are finished. Don't let us be unnecessarily gloomy. Let us be as hopeful as we can. We have made no false step so far. That is always a great thing. Your instinct," and he beamed at Mrs. Gilmour, "to keep everything in the narrowest circle was absolutely sound. The fewer people we take into our confidence the better. I myself am very hopeful. I quite see your point, Emily, about the impossibility of their getting married so late in the day—as she did not leave the house till three p.m.—and the annoyance of to-morrow's being Sunday. Also I follow Leonard's argument. As a lawyer he is on his own ground there;" and he nodded and smiled at Leonard. "You know what you are talking about when you assure us that he could not obtain a special license, any more than the ordinary kind, without making the false declaration that Claire is over age or that her guardians are consenting parties. But there are ways of *getting round*

things. And we have to consider whether in the peculiar circumstances he would hesitate to make the declaration. Personally I don't think that as a gallant man he ought to hesitate. No, honestly, I don't attach too much importance to Leonard's doubts—and I feel that we shall be wrong if we impute the worst motives, until we have greater reason to do so."

Then Belton came in with a telegram and offered it to Mrs. Gilmour on a salver.

"It's a telegram," said Mrs. Gilmour.

Belton hurried from the room, rather shattering the polite pretence by his discreet anxiety to get away before the telegram was opened and read.

"C. is quite safe. Will write.—Roddy."

They all read the message in turn, each contributing ejaculations, and the paper was started for another round of the table.

"That's all he says. . . . No more than that. . . . Handed in at Southhampton West. . . . Fancy his daring to sign it Roddy. . . . Yes, handed in at Southhampton West."

And a feverishly agitated discussion burst forth as to how the message should be interpreted.

Uncle Derek was inclined to think that the use of the diminutive Roddy was a favourable indication. "Besides, I ask myself: If he did not mean well, why should he telegraph at all?"

"You don't think," said Mrs. Gilmour, "that they are married already?"

"Of course they are not married," said Mr. Joyce.

"I was asking Uncle Derek, not you, Leonard."

"No," said Uncle Derek regretfully. "I think if a marriage of any sort had been consummated—I should say, celebrated—that he would say so, and put us out of our

suspense. No, I don't think they are married. Not yet."

"Southhampton West!" cried Mrs. Gilmour abruptly. "That's where the ships sail for America;" and she threw herself right back in her chair, and closed her eyes. "It is plain. He has lured her down there in order to take her to America."

"But why should he do that?"

"Who can say? Revenge, wickedness! We shall all be disgraced. We shall never see her again."

"Nay, nay," said Uncle Derek. "We must not throw up the sponge like this. We must go on hoping for the best. There is no lane so long that it has not a turning, sooner or later."

At this same hour of the evening the runaway couple had just finished supper in their farmhouse parlour. Presently they stood in the wooden porch with the lamplight behind them and the grey mysterious night in front of them. Great bushes and shrubs in the small garden seemed of enormous size, and clusters of blossoms showing their true colours where the lamp glow fell upon them looked like paper flowers; further off she could make out dark masses of foliage of apparently limitless extent, and, beyond some unseen meadows, a heath that they had crossed in the fading daylight rose upwards to a long ridge and the faint grey sky. The scene was lovely, fantastic, dream-like, seeming to be millions of miles away from Sloane Street and Lennox Gardens, belonging to a different world —the outskirts of her newly discovered country, her land of freedom and hope.

Roddy said she must be tired by now, and after giving him one of her childlike kisses she went upstairs to bed.

The lattice window stood open and the soft pure air came gently in, with whispers of the trees, strange, far-off sounds of birds or beasts, and a wonderful fragrance of flowers and herbs and earth. The ceiling was so low

that she could touch it with her hand; the sheets were stiff and rough; the nightgown lent her by the landlady was as heavy as a smock-frock. The whole little bed, as she stooped over it, smelt like a field of new-mown grass. But she loved it all; she would not have had anything otherwise. Roddy was pacing to and fro in the garden below the window, giving her a sense of company and protection in the midst of strangeness, and his voice was the last thing that she heard before she dropped off to sleep. He called to her softly and kindly.

"Good-night, you dear little, brave little Claire. Sleep well. Good-night."

"Good-night, dear Roddy," she murmured drowsily.

Next day was Sunday, but on the morrow he hired a motor car and took her over to Lymington, where he bought her a cotton dress, a Panama hat, another pair of shoes, and anything else that she wanted to make her comfortable. She was surprised that they had not been married before now, but she felt no uneasiness on this point. She was, however, slightly distressed when he refused to allow her to write to her mother and give their address, as she had promised. He reassured her by saying that he was about to write to them himself, and reminded her that, having had his telegram, they knew she was quite safe.

Then for day after day it was the happiest time of her life. They tramped for prodigious distances through the splendid old forest, drove in a little pony-cart, took their food with them and had picnics. It was all novelty, all happiness. The landlady, the farmer, the dairywomen, even the animals in the farmyard, had become old and valued friends to her. It was sunshine, health, laughter. And throughout it all, Roddy was the perfect companion, what Cyril used to be but could never be again, like a brother, like a friend, like a boisterous, happy-go-lucky schoolboy.

Yet beneath all the fun and frolic business was pro-

gressing satisfactorily. Before a week of the idyll had slipped away Roddy was in treaty with the family. Everything was working out exactly as he had anticipated. He had all the trump cards; and, metaphorically, he banged them down on the table with exultant determination, saying "Play to that. My trick, I fancy, if you don't mind. Got anything bigger than the King? No, I thought not. Thank you."

He had sent them a terrible letter to begin with, saying that Claire had sought refuge with him from the cruelty and ill-usage that she was suffering at home, and in dread lest she should be forced into a marriage with a man old enough to be her grandfather from the mercenary motives of those who were trying to abuse their position as guardians. He further told them that if they questioned his conduct in the matter, he was quite "prepared to have the whole thing thrashed out in public."

The absolute propriety of his conduct gave him an added strength. He asked himself if ever a man had shown greater delicacy of mind, more chivalrous self-restraint. He was ardently, madly in love with the girl; she had placed herself unreservedly in his power; and yet she had been held as safe and sacred as if she had sought sanctuary at an ancient religious shrine instead of at a hatter's shop in New Bond Street. He thought of his virtue constantly, feeling that he had really risen to great heights, and that, cost him what it might, he would keep on the lofty plane. Indeed, in this respect, he felt so artlessly pleased with himself, that when at last he went up to London to meet them all he was ready to be magnanimous in his victory; to cry quits, to let bygones be bygones. "They have been lucky," he thought, "to have to deal with somebody not only genuinely devoted to her, but a true gentleman into the bargain." If they would say something like that themselves, he would shake hands with them and all might be smiles again.

He was two nights in London; and Claire had now become so much at home down here that she scarcely missed him. But she was on the heath cart-track at sunset on the evening of his return, waiting for the little pony-cart in which a farm-hand was driving him from Brockenhurst Junction.

He jumped down gaily from the cart, and as they walked on side by side he told her all the news. First and foremost, he was going to take her home to her mother's house to-morrow.

"Roddy! You don't mean it? You *can't* mean that you want to make me do that."

"Yes, my dearest, it's quite all right. You go back as my affianced bride, and as such you will be treated with the respect and honour due to you. Oh, I've put my foot down on the old nonsense, and they won't begin *that* game again—treating you as if you weren't out of your teens. They're sending the announcement of our engagement to *The Times* and *Morning Post*—and I shall send it myself to the *Financial News*. We're to be married as soon as you can get your trousseau." And he ran on joyously. "There are to be several large dinner-parties to introduce me to people. It's going to be done in real style. You're going to have a slap-up wedding—as many bridesmaids as you please; very likely a bishop there to turn us off. You'll enjoy it, Claire."

"I shall hate it. Why can't we be married quietly here, as you intended?"

"For all sorts of reasons. Now trust me—go on trusting me, my pretty one. Roddy knows his way about; Roddy will pull you through. I've a letter from your mother in my pocket. She sends heaps of love, and implores you to fall in with the arrangements she is making." And his voice showed the satisfaction that he felt. "I think your mother and I are going to get on very well together. She called me Roddy once, and asked me to

fetch something from the next room. Claire, I felt quite touched. It showed so plainly that she had come round. Yes, the entire quarrel, or misunderstanding, is over; and there's no sense in not being friendly with one's wife's relations if one can be so without loss of dignity. That old fellow Harpington sang a very different song—but I do him the justice of admitting that he was always courteous, and I believe he really took to me from the beginning. There's no humbug about your brother John; he has his head screwed on all right. He doesn't like me, not as yet; but we shall hit it off later. Master Cyril is just a cub, and Mrs. Joyce still has her knife into me; but they both know they have got to be civil for the future. Ruck up, Claire. Don't be down about this little separation. It won't be more than a month, all told, I dare say—and then, think of it; you get your Reddy and I get my Claire. Tum, tum, terrumtum tum-tum," and he hummed the Wedding March and laughed. "Where shall I take you for your honeymoon?"

"Bring me back here."

"Oh, no, that would be too tame and flat. We have fairly exhausted Do-nothing Valley and Slack-about Hill. Paris! I'll take you to Paris. It's ages since I've been there. Paris, Claire—Longchamps racecourse, the Bois at tea-time, the boulevards by lamplight!" And he laughed again. "Later in the day Mr. and Mrs. Roderick Vaughan left for the continent. 'That sounds all right, eh? But we'll break the journey at Dover, Claire."

He was in the highest good spirits, and did not understand that Claire's heart had grown as heavy as lead.

CHAPTER IX

AMIDST the ordinary traffic of Sloane Street, and considerably impeding it, cars and carriages loaded with bright faces and gay-coloured frocks, with silk hats and black coats, with bouquets and streamers, were slowly approaching the church. People on omnibuses stood up to look. "See, a wedding. A grand affair." The invited guests were filing in through the crowd outside the church, and the red carpet was hidden in the press; policemen were busy; all that part of the church not reserved and guarded with red ropes was thronged already, and still more uninvited surged in by side doors. A verger at one of these doors struggled out, saying "Standing room only;" and of a sudden the other side door was closed and bolted.

"They've shut the other door. If we don't get in this way we shan't get in at all. . . . Don't push. . . . Take your turn. . . . I beg your pardon, I've been here ten minutes before you." The desire to get inside before it was too late produced something like frenzy in these nursemaids and shopgirls, who had arrived on the scene in the beginning merely as quiet passers-by, and they elbowed and shoved with violence. They called to the verger for help, asking him to mind their perambulators for them or take charge of their bonnet-boxes: "I wonder you talk such nonsense," said the verger, perspiring and unable to move in the scrimmage. "Who ever heard of bringing perambulators to a wedding?"

Inside the church it was just lovely—worth all the heat and tussle; sunlight, scent of flowers, music; rustling of silk, movement of feathers, gauze and lace; buzzing as of bees in a glass hive; the beautiful dresses passing up

the aisle, the sleek rather Jewish-looking groomsmen escorting ladies to their pews—everything that they had come for, hoped for. Only they would have liked to be nearer to the heart of it, within the ropes, in the inner circle.

Up there you could see better, and hear what the guests were saying. The guests were all whispering together.

"They've got a bishop, haven't they? What bishop? The one that married Emily Joyce. He's an old friend of the family. . . . Oh, my *dear*, look. On your right. Did you *ever?* Painted two inches thick, and sixty if she's a day. . . . What's the name of the best man. Schilitzer? Jew, isn't he? . . . . I don't think the bridegroom's friends are anything to write home about, do you? And so *few* of them. . . . They wanted to put me on that side, but I wasn't taking any. I said 'Bride's friend, if you please.'"

Roddy, with the sunlight full upon him, with his face all radiant, and himself gorgeous in his brand new clothes, stood in the correct position by the chancel steps waiting for the bride. He, too, had noticed the emptiness on the bridegroom's side of the church, and it was he who told the best man to fill those unoccupied pews with the bride's people. And a little later when he saw that they, bound by custom, refused to sit on what they considered their wrong side, he issued orders to move up the vulgar, or casual, congregation. But to the end there were vacant benches.

Claire's family were all assembled. Their friends from both south and north of the park had mustered in great force, all smiling delightedly. And during these expectant moments, while everybody waited for the bride, the buzz of whispering talk grew louder, as of bees about to swarm.

It is a mistake to suppose that only women are fond of weddings; men are just as fond of them really. They often make a fuss about going, but when there they enjoy themselves quite as much as their wives and sisters. Indeed many men go to weddings of their own accord. Timid men

who never mean to get married go in the same way that they go to the *Folies Bergère* and other dangerous places when they are in Paris, because it gives them a sensation that they are playing with fire. Hard-hearted men of business, such as solicitors, accountants, land agents, and so forth, go to weddings without being dragged by female relatives, because they have expanded a habit that started by attending funerals. They take a gloomy interest in observing pretty girls and substantial young matrons who were children the other day, or the robust, overbearing man with whom they quarrelled, now white-haired and beginning to grow feeble. Poor relations, however remote, also treat weddings as seriously as funerals, going to them from vast distances and never missing payment of "this last mark of respect."

What normal men and women alike enjoy is the excitement of a wedding: that crowd contagion to which it is a pleasure to yield oneself, and out of which presently arises a new vigour of individual thought. One is swayed by the unreasonable emotion all round one; a lump comes into one's throat; love of humanity is stirred by the sight of so many cheerful faces; aspirations for the good of the universe swell upward inside one because so many bright young eyes are flashing with hope. Then as the general excitement wanes a more definite but no less lively meditation begins.

And it was so now at the wedding of Claire and Roddy. Everybody was thinking. In all the big church there was not a soul who did not feel stirred and strongly affected. They thought of the sanctity of marriage, the loveliness of the bond; thinking of it, some of them, as the only beautiful and yet unassailable thing left to us in England. Husbands, bald and red externally, grew young and tender inwardly as they thought of the day when they stood waiting by stone steps, like the man over there. Elderly wives, forgetting the agonies caused by bad temper and unskilled

cooks, remembered only the nights when they and their helpmates had watched and prayed by a sick child's bed. Mrs. Drysdale furtively touched Mr. Drysdale's hand, and Mr. Drysdale acknowledged the pressure with an ineffable smile. Mothers of unmarried girls, those innocent girls themselves, even indurated old bachelors, all thought with tenderness of happy unions and hearts that from long habit beat as one. Two little actresses, friends of Cyril, who were seated just inside the ropes on the bride's side, lost their terrible self-consciousness, ceased to look at themselves in tiny gold-framed mirrors or to dab their noses with the powder puffs that they carried in their lace handkerchiefs. They began to feel quite small and insignificant. After all, this was the *real* thing.

Roddy had sprung to attention. The buzzing was like that of bees about to acclaim their queen. The bride's procession was coming up the church, and all heads had turned.

"How *young* she looks! . . . Yes, isn't she tall? . . . So *white!*"

She was arm in arm with Uncle Derek, who looked triumphant, seeming to say, "What did I tell you? A little patience, and everything comes right in the end. Here we are; and could anything be pleasanter or more satisfactory?" Following them came little pages in white satin and child bridemaids, with coifs on their golden hair, who seemed to symbolize the aim and hope of this contract and ceremony. After them came splendid big adult bridesmaids, with nice skins and soft eyes, with immense hats from Madame Alcide, and rather modest little bouquets, the gift of the bridegroom. Presently, when the procession halted, these fine big young women hid the contracting parties and generally obstructed the view.

The organ stopped playing; instead of the whispering there was a sudden tense hush, as on a racecourse when the flag has fallen and someone has shouted, "They're

off!" The solemnization had begun. And as the sonorous words of the service, so familiar but still so grand, fell upon listening ears, all the thoughts deepened.

. . . "*And therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly.*" . . . Uncle Derek, modestly drawn back a little way, beamed with kindly satisfaction. . . . "*First, It was ordained for the procreation of children.*" . . . Mrs. Gilmour thought of her family: Lawrence in his kilt; Angela the invalid, now gone: Emily, who had never given her a moment's anxiety; and Cyril, of whom that could not be said —and of Claire, too, of course. It was a great relief after all the fuss to see dear Claire being settled so pleasantly and comfortably, and as she herself had wished. . . . "*Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin.*" . . . Cyril's two little chorus girls nudged each other.

"*Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife,*"— the vows were to be spoken now—"*to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?*"

That queer man Evan Giles, the writer, actually groaned aloud. His thoughts had wandered far away. But the thoughts of old Sir Kenelm Grantley were very much to the point. Old and shaky as he was, he had borne his disappointment like a man; making no complaints, sending a present in the shape of a large cheque accompanied by a very sweet letter of good wishes. He thought now with sadness. He had seen her grow up, and he would so much have liked to watch over her and cherish her while she blossomed into maturity. He had intended to be very gentle with her, very kind and generous, and never, if he could help it, either intrusive or obtrusive. He would not have allowed her to regret her goodness in accepting him. But it was not to be. And

he knew of no one else at the moment that he could put in the place of the late Isabelle.

"*Who giveth this Woman to be married to this Man?*"

Emily Joyce and one or two others thought that she had given herself; but Uncle Derek with the slightest and most courteous of gestures indicated to the bishop and assistant clergy that *he* was giving her, seeming to add in unspoken words that now and always he was without reserve ready to do anything expected of him.

"*O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace. . . .*"

Roddy and Claire were kneeling now, all by themselves, at the altar rails, and the sunshine through the high southern windows poured down upon them. Quite unexpectedly, indeed much to her own surprise, Emily Joyce began to cry. Aunt Agnes had been quietly weeping for some little time, but as if she liked doing it. And a tear stole down the nose of Mrs. Gilmour, as she went on thinking about the girl that she had always neglected. Dear Claire. She *hoped* that Claire had chosen wisely. At any rate, she, her mother, had taken no responsibility in the matter. It was all Claire's doing. In the words of the adage, Claire had made her bed and must henceforth lie on it. That was the purport of everything that had been said throughout the ceremony.

The music burst forth again; the choir began to sing, and the women in the church, old and young, ceased to notice the bridegroom at all. Their hearts were vibrating with sympathy for the white-veiled kneeling girl; deep, womanly instincts moved them now instead of mere thoughts, and their wishes were as fervent as prayers. The music ceased; the song was over, or fading into breathless silence.

"*Lord, have mercy upon us.*"

"*Christ, have mercy upon us.*"

"*Lord, have mercy upon us.*"

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And then soon the bishop said a few words to the newly-married couple. During the years that had passed since he married Emily his style had ripened. He delivered what all felt to be a beautiful impressive address, in which the priestly and paternal manner was gracefully blended with the intimate tone proper to a very old friend of the family.

"You, Claire, who come from a home of love," he began. And he went on to say how she could not fail to excel in the duties of a wife, because of the advantages she had enjoyed in her upbringing and training, with examples of domestic bliss ever before her eyes to study and imitate.

"And you, Roderick, who are gallant and brave, who have travelled to the ends of the earth and fought for your native land." And he told Roddy, in effect, that he might find it a bit difficult at first, but he would very soon pick up the ways of a perfect husband.

Mrs. Gilmour blew her nose and felt extraordinarily contented and hopeful, full of affection for dear Claire, and more and more confident that things had worked out for the best. Why should not Claire be happy? She had secured the man of her choice; and after her marriage, as she knew from experience, the love always goes on increasing. The knowledge that you ought to be happy, that you *have* to be happy, in your married life, is half the battle. As so beautifully and forcibly impressed upon one in the service now drawing to a close, you have so many sacred duties to perform in married life that, unless you are fanciful, you have not *time* to be unhappy even though it lasts till death puts an end to it.

The married couple had gone into the vestry, followed by Mrs. Gilmour, Aunt Agnes, Uncle Derek; and more and more people were being fetched to sign the book. All was now gaiety. One whispered no longer, but talked

freely in one's natural voice. As always, it was said by those not invited into the vestry that they had never known such a long wait at any wedding. Cyril came down the church and sat for a little while with his two chorus girls. The best man came hurriedly down the church, looking pale and anxious, as though somebody had fallen ill and he was in search of a doctor. But he was only making sure that the big doors at the bottom of the church stood wide open and that the right car was outside them.

Then, next moment, the organ began to play the "Wedding March." The triumphant melody filled the church, stirring deeper chords inside one than as yet had been touched, making the stone and wood and iron of the building itself vibrate. And in the midst of the tremor, the sunlight, and the beating hearts, the happy pair swept past and out through the big doors.

People down there were standing on the pew seats; nursemaids and bonnet girls could not contain themselves.

"Did you see her face? . . . Did you see how it lit up? . . . He's all a man, mind you. . . . Did you see how he looked at her? . . . Looked as if he could eat her, didn't he?"

In the ugly street traffic was again impeded; the crowd of sightseers overflowed the pavements; cars and carriages full of bridesmaids, dowagers, bald-headed gentlemen, and flowers and ribbons and silk hats, slowly threaded their way past Cadogan Place and round the corner to the large house with the red carpet and the awning.

Many of the guests walked from the church to the house. One old buster, in white spats and pearl grey trousers, walking with several other men, made a remark that is often heard on these auspicious occasions.

"Happy is the bride that the sun shines on."

"Exactly. I just said so to my wife. And what a

pretty bride. Really beautiful, quite ethereal—that's what my wife said."

"What I don't understand," said a tall young man, "is how a common fellow like that could get such a girl."

"Well, my dear Everett," said the old buster philosophically, "between you and me and the post, girls marry anybody nowadays because they treat marriage so lightly. If they don't like it, they kick over the traces. Divorce is made so easy nowadays."

"Is it?"

"Yet," said another man, "they're agitating to change the law and make it easier."

"Oh, I hope that'll never be done," said the old buster, as they turned the corner and came in sight of the awning. "If you strike at the institution of marriage itself, well, it's all up."

"Still," said young Mr. Everett, "it beats me how her people can have let her go to a common fellow like that."

"Ssh. Here we are."

It was all over now. The happy pair had gone away. They were alone in a reserved compartment of the boat express. London had dropped behind them; glaring chalk, yellow cornfields, the pleasant Kentish landscape flashed past the windows; and the train gathering speed rocked and swayed a little.

"You darling girl."

Roddy caressed her with ardour, made her sit on his knee, pulling her about, and all the time exulting. "You are mine now—my very own—till death us do part. My property. I may beat you with a stick no bigger than my little finger." And he began to take such liberties with his property that she was scared, and gave a little cry.

"Oh, please let me go."

He, all flushed, and seeming to her of a sudden changed and ugly, laughed and released her. "All right;" and he brought out a cigarette, lit it, and puffed at it rapidly. "All right, my pretty one, we'll be a real husband and wife by to-morrow morning."

And even then she did not know what he meant. Neither her mother, her aunt, nor her sister had enlightened her. After all, no one had explained to her any of the mysteries of God's holy ordinance into which she had entered so trustfully.

CHAPTER X

FOR the next month or two they were "dashing about and showing themselves," as he called it.

After Paris he let Trouville see them; and after that in quick succession Homburg, Baden, the Italian lakes and Venice had peeps of them. Pope the maid, as well as her mistress, felt the immense change of this life of prompt or sudden action after the feeble, procrastinating air of Mrs. Gilmour's establishment, in which all plans and schemes, even when they seemed red-hot, soon faded and cooled to mere subjects for future discussion. Pope was always packing and unpacking.

In October she opened the huge boxes on a round of country house visits, and Roddy for the first time found himself in really good society. That kind old fellow, Uncle Derek, had used all his social influence on their behalf, writing to the chieftains of his vast clan and delicately intimating that he would accept in payment of services he had been able to render any kindness and attention offered to his young connections Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan. "Quite big pots" received them hospitably, as Roddy freely owned when acknowledging the courtesy of his uncle by marriage.

One mansion to which it might naturally have been expected that the bridegroom would lead his bride was still closed to them. He had duly apprised his own great uncle, Sir Roderick, of his change of condition, sending with an affectionate letter several newspaper cuttings that gave a fine account of the wedding itself; but to the letter Sir Roderick made no reply, although he returned all the printed matter after scrawling thereon in his crabbed old hand two words only: "*Very interesting.*"

"Never mind," said Roddy, with scarcely shaken optimism. "He'll hear about us before long. Then he'll come round all right."

Before the end of November they were established at that hotel in Piccadilly which Roddy had always reverenced as a very temple of fashion, prosperity, and success. They were here only *pro tem.*, of course. Already he was busy at his work, with many irons in the fire, and during leisure moments looking out for a suitable private residence.

"That," he said jovially, "is something for you to do, young lady."

She was ready to do anything he told her. She had given herself without reservations, and every hour of the day some mental readjustment was necessary to enable her to keep in sympathy with him. If he thought differently from people she had known hitherto, she also must think differently.

"We are fashionable folk," he said gaily. "I heard some one make the remark, as I was following you through the lounge, 'There's that pretty Mrs. Vaughan.' Of course, any ass could say that, but it means you are *somebody*." He urged her to be photographed as often as possible, was delighted when reproductions appeared in illustrated newspapers, and promised to have her portrait painted by one of the tip-top men in time for next year's Academy. "Mrs. Roddy Vaughan is going to be a celebrity before I've done with her."

He congratulated himself on having secured a conspicuous table in the dining-room, and explained to her exactly why he was so pleased about it. "People see us here. They can't avoid it. Strangers, too, ask for this table and the answer Carlos gives them is, 'Oh, no, permanently reserved for Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan.' Well, by that means we are impressing ourselves. See? Like Pears' soap. It has to be done all the time nowadays, if you

mean to get on. Can't hide one's light under a bushel."

Sitting, then, at the special table, gorgeous every night in his white waistcoat, with jewelled buttons, large pearl studs, and formidably stiff shirt front, he thoroughly enjoyed himself. He liked it all—the sight of the men's shining faces and the women's bare shoulders; the mingled perfume of powder and warm food; the sound of knives and forks heard through the music of the band; the unanalyzed general sensation of being crowded, hurried, and over-charged.

He nodded at all his acquaintance and gave an unflagging scrutiny to other passers-by, whispering names to Claire and keeping her well-informed.

"There goes the Chilian minister. . . . That's the Duke of Danesbrough. Second time he has dined here this week. . . . You see, they all come here. They *will* have the best; and, say, what you may, this *is* the best. . . . By Jove, there's Evie St. Evremonde—with another big party. You know—acts the heroine in *The Girl from Timbuctoo.*"

Opposite to him at the round table, with the china basket of fruit and the half-emptied bottle of champagne as the only material things separating them, sat his beautiful, distinguished, obedient wife; and when he was tired of looking at other people it was always a pleasure to look at her. She was really a tip-topper—so ran his contented thoughts: No two ways about it. She had risen to the occasion, moreover, in such an admirable style; taking on the composure and dignity proper to a married woman; as it were, bulking large if not solid to fit the wider space in the universe that he had elbowed and pushed out for her. It seemed to him that she carried things off as easily as if she had been his wife for ten years.

And, indeed, Claire had grown older in a most surprising manner. It was not that her pretty complexion

had altered, or that if you had put her in a weighing machine you would have found her really heavier, but all that was childish or immature in her aspect had gone utterly; if the birdlike tones of youth still sounded in her voice, they were within a narrower compass and held strictly under control; she greeted Roddy's whispered jokes with a grave and tolerant smile, and even when he himself felt that he was at his funniest, never startled the restaurant by one of those bursts of rippling laughter which middle-aged gentlemen used to listen for at her mother's stately dinner-parties.

Beyond these obvious and natural modifications there was a subtle, inexplicable change in her that only Aunt Agnes had observed; and even she was not sure about it. Aunt Agnes, seeing her so incredibly older, graver, and more self-possessed than she had been such a little while ago, had a disturbing, fanciful notion that Claire was *prematurely* old, like a person who has passed through some tremendous and abnormal experience—railway accident, shipwreck, siege or revolution—and of whom one says, "She is all right now, completely recovered, but I don't suppose she will ever be really quite the same again."

At last Claire found a house near Pont Street that Roddy thought would do. It was solidly built, in imitation of the early Georgian style of architecture; not as big a house as he wanted, but nevertheless it would serve their purpose until they moved into something better.

Claire was delighted by the prospect of having a home at last. Her spirits rose at the mere thought of escaping from this life led in public to the sound of a string band; and Roddy, seeing her elation, understood its cause and praised her for feeling so pleased.

"You are tired of *pro tem.* arrangements," he said cheerily. "You want your own house. Mind you, it will be your very own, and everything in it, too." He said

this again and again, explaining that the home is the wife's province; she reigns there as queen; and the husband's status within the four walls of home is only that of subject, perpetual visitor, or steward and purse-bearer.

Claire then became very busy in regard to No. 9 Sedgmoor Street, the new province of which she was to be queen. She told her subject exactly how she proposed to decorate and furnish the house. In her mind's eye she could see it finished and habitable, rather like Aunt Agnes's house as to its simplicity and avoidance of stereotyped ornament, but with many characteristics that would be individual to herself. To carry out her whole scheme might prove rather expensive, and thinking of the cost with conscientious scruples she had a brilliantly happy idea. Why not spend the money that had come to her in cheques as wedding presents?"

"Do please, please let me do it, Roddy."

He had taken all those cheques from her—not only the big ones of Sir Kenelm and her brother John, and the lesser ones of her mother, Aunt Agnes, the Joyces, but also the many comparatively small ones of old friends—so that he might put the total amount on deposit at the bank; advising her to buy herself jewellery later on. But, as she now urged, she would far rather spend the money in making the house just what she wanted.

"Oh, my dear," he said laughing, "we have blown all that long ago."

She did not understand at first; and he explained, with slight irritability in his tone, that you cannot dash about the world as they had done for nothing, and that he had been obliged to transfer the deposit to current account before their honeymoon was over.

After a long and thoughtful pause she asked him to say how much she would be justified in spending altogether. "Perhaps, Roddy, I ought to give up some of my fancies.

You know, the black and white pavement in the hall, and the other things I told you about."

"Well," he said cheerfully. "I don't see why we need stint ourselves. We have our solid income of three thousand five hundred, and all *I* make into the bargain. Pretty useful, eh? No, you go straight ahead, Claire. Get good value for your outlay, *that's* the great thing. Don't go and buy a lot of Wardour Street rubbish, of course. But you won't do that. You're learned about furniture, aren't you?"

"I really have studied it, Roddy. Aunt Agnes and I used to spend days at the South Kensington Museum."

"Right. Then you go straight ahead."

Claire worked hard now, and in a businesslike manner, getting estimates for the black and white paving and the other things, and haunting sale-rooms and the shops of second-hand dealers. Roddy laughed gaily at her labours and anxieties.

Then one evening at dinner, before the estimates were ready to be submitted to him for approval, he told her that he had lifted the whole burden off her shoulders. He had called in Nappensols, the well-known firm of decorators, to do the whole thing.

For a little while she could say nothing; she was so surprised, so unutterably disappointed. Presently she asked in what manner did Messrs. Nappensol propose to deal with the house.

"My dear girl, they're at the top of the tree. They make you pay for it, but you get the best taste in Europe."

"But *how* are they going to do it?"

"I gave them *carte blanche*." And he stopped eating, stared at her, and spoke irritably. "Well, what's the matter? I try to please you, and you look sulky about it."

"Oh, Roddy, I wish, I *wish* you had left it to me."

Then he spoke more irritably still. "My dear girl, I

couldn't afford to go on fiddling about it till doomsday. I have my work to do in the world."

She stretched her hand across the table and touched his coat sleeve, whispering apprehensively. "Roddy, don't talk so loud. People can hear what you are saying."

"I don't care a damn if they can." But he said this in a lower tone, with concentrated energy. Then he pushed his plate away. "You have spoilt my dinner!" and he got up, and stalked out of the restaurant.

She could scarcely believe that he had done a thing so ungallant as to leave her like this, alone at the table, in the middle of the public room. But he had done it. She sat there, letting the waiters bring her an ice and biscuits, feeling that the assiduous Mr. Carlos knew what had happened, believing that guests at other tables looked at her with awakened curiosity and malicious interest. She stayed there, in order to make them think that everything was all right. The blood had rushed to her face; but she was now pale again, and very calm outwardly.

She had flushed from indignation and astonishment. People don't do rude things like that. One cannot permit oneself to be so treated without putting on record some expression of one's resentment. She was a married woman, not a child.

And then slowly there fell upon her the sense of being abandoned. All protection and care had been withdrawn from her; she was alone, surrounded by this noisy, inimical crowd; as utterly lost and helpless as a little girl of three or four who finds herself left on the platform of a great railway station.

Literally she possessed only him; she had given up everything in exchange for him. And now he had spoken roughly to her, was quarrelling with her. What could she do if he failed her? It would not be as in the old days when Nurse Mitchell disparaged her, when Cyril or Emily nagged at her, when her mother did not seem to want her. If Roddy failed her, the whole world tumbled to

pieces. She felt that the quarrel must be ended at all costs, now, without another minute's dangerous delay. She went upstairs determined to finish it, anyhow.

But he had gone out. Pope said that he came for his overcoat and crush hat, and seemed angry because a white muffler had not been laid there ready for him.

Claire waited for him in the sitting-room among his things: those signs and tokens of personal possession that had obliterated the vapid elegances which greeted them on their first arrival in the room. He had made it his, as he did with everything that he touched. The gold and enamel of the writing-table was almost entirely hidden by his correspondence files, letter trays, and handy books of reference; his despatch box was on the floor by his table; over the back of an armchair hung the gorgeous smoking-jacket or dressing-gown that he put on late at night when he smoked a pipe; the Chelsea shepherdesses on the mantel shelf appeared to be dancing round a monument formed by his unopened cigarette boxes; and a faint but ineradicable odour of stale tobacco clung to the muslin and brocade of the window curtains. There was nothing of Claire in the room, except herself.

She had to wait a long time; it was late when he returned.

"Well? Sulking still?"

"Roddy, I don't sulk," and she spoke quite as a child now, with a tremor in her reproachful voice. "Why are you so unkind to me?"

"Unkind! Isn't it all the other way round?" And he burst into eloquent self-vindication. "You wounded me to the quick, Claire. Teaching me manners! Why don't you say you're ashamed of me at once? It amounts to that."

"Roddy! How can you say such things?" She had come quite close to him, her hands against his breast, her eyes full of tears.

But he went on vigorously, showing not anger now but

lacerated pride. "I know you're superior and all that. Very likely I *have* no taste, and am poorly educated—or cultivated, as you'd put it—compared with people who have been idle all their lives, and never been forced to earn their daily bread. The chances of improving myself have been devilish few, but I've never missed one of them if I could help it. I dare say some of your high and mighty friends think me a bounder. But one expects loyalty from one's wife."

"I give it you, Roddy. I *am* loyal. And how can you belittle yourself? Of course no one ever thought anything of the kind."

He was genuinely suffering in his injured self-esteem. Remorse filled her at discovering that she had unconsciously hurt him far more than he had hurt her; and she was horror-stricken as he echoed the dreadful idea that had whispered in all her own thoughts of him during the last few hours.

They made it up, with many kisses. In a minute he was gay again. He bore no malice. He had forgotten all about it next morning, and he told her that he would try to take her to Monte Carlo for New Year's day.

So in due course Claire said that she was very much pleased with the ready-made house, and betrayed no sign of regret that the house of her dreams had vanished for ever.

The work of Messrs. Nappensol might well have been worse. They used parquetry instead of black and white pavement for the hall, hanging above it a lantern so splendid that nobody would ask to what period it belonged or whose art had served for its model; they provided a green watered silk boudoir for the lady and an oak parlour for the gentleman, and were lavish in their lighting arrangements throughout the reception rooms—in a word, they made the house exactly like a dozen other houses that they were doing just then, either for the

newly married or the newly rich. In March Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan were established, with all their friends praising the house. "What *real* taste you have shown, Claire!" She let them say it.

He had declared that he expected loyalty, and of a truth he got it. She astonished people by her knowledge of his enterprises. At a dinner-party given in their honour by the Drysdales she talked so learnedly about the North Sea Domestic Fisheries and other recently launched companies that the wives of two stout City men listened to her with admiration and envy. Mrs. Drysdale, sitting beside her on a sofa after dinner, applauded her, squeezed her hand, and said how delightful it was to see her so happy. "You deserved it, Claire. But it is a great prize. I saw him look at you during dinner almost exactly as my dear Frank looks at me sometimes. There is no mistaking that look."

She loyally wished to enter into and understand all the scheming and effort that made up the greater part of his life. In this joint affair of marriage she wanted to be useful, and not merely an ornamental partner. She was always thinking how she might help him, and with this end in view she shrunk from no toil or weariness.

One evening when they had dined at home and were sitting in the green boudoir, he found on her desk a sheet of notepaper covered with typewritten sentences, or rather with one sentence repeated again and again: "*I will awake Willie as we call Delia. I will awake Willie*"—— and so on, from the top to the bottom of the page.

"Claire! What in the name of reason is this?"

She explained that it was a three-finger exercise for the typewriter. She was learning to typewrite, and to do shorthand, too, in order to be useful to him now and then after office hours.

"Well," he said, laughing, "I'll put you to the test now. Get out your things."

From its hiding-place she shyly brought a light folding

apparatus, and sat down with her stenographer's note-book open on her knees. "You know, I wanted it to be a surprise for you." And she looked up at him, her face animated and intent, her eyes shining.

"Mr. Roderick Vaughan presents his compliments to the Governor of the Bank of England and begs to request that——"

"Not *quite* so fast, Roddy."

He stood with his watch in his hand dictating to her. But she was too slow. He smiled at her, and told her to try to take down what he said upon the machine direct. She obeyed him, sitting in front of her typewriter and clicking with nervous vigour.

"There," and, breathless from excitement and anxiety, she handed him the paper. "Remember, Roddy, I don't profess to be ready. I have only had four weeks' practice."

He looked at her attempt. "Upon my word, not bad—but frankly, not good enough. I couldn't afford to send out a letter done like that."

She pleaded for time. Her instructors said she was making good progress. It would be so useful for him to have a typist on the premises to give aid when he wanted things done in a hurry, and it would be such a pleasure to her.

But he said no. "No, later on, I'll have a lady secretary. Honestly, I should not like the idea of my wife typing. *Infra dig.*"

"Oh, no."

"Yes, I place my wife on a pedestal, and I don't want her ever to come down from it. Besides, you have more than enough to do to run the house properly. That'll take you all your time."

And then and there he reeled off half dozen points of domestic management at No. 9 that seemed to him susceptible of improvement.

"Yes, it's personal attention—the mistress's eye, as

my aunt always says—that makes the wheels run smooth, whether in a hotel or a private house. Especially, don't forget about Barrett's dirty gloves and ice daily for the butter dishes. That's something to keep you occupied and all in your own department, old girl."

Claire humbly promised to give prompt attention to all these matters.

He had said that it was her house, and at first she took pleasure in its management; but little by little he spoilt it for her, extracting the joy out of it, leaving only the worry and distress. Nothing was her own really; nothing that she herself devised or ordered was allowed to remain unchanged. All of the house that was not Nappensol was Roddy.

It was he who dressed the footman, the chauffeur, and the groom in liveries of a quietness so splendid that it seemed more ostentatious than red plush and white silk. He liked to get the motor-car and the pony-cart at the front door together; with the footman standing by, Pope coming down the steps to carry her mistress's wraps, and the butler visible on the threshold. The close grouping of so much magnificence cheered him; but then the sometime sergeant-major asserted himself, and he held an inspection of all present. Then it was that he sternly opened the chauffeur's tool-case, found dust in the pony's hogged mane, and pointed terribly with his cane at the groom's soiled white gloves. If only he could have refrained from speaking to the servants so severely. He used to tell her to reprove them; but then he could not wait for her to do it, and sent an insulting message to be carried by one to another, or worse still, robbed them of all sense of comfort and security by descending into the basement and there exploding.

That was how he lost her Mrs. White, a really good and honest cook. One of Claire's greatest difficulties with regard to their evening meals lay in the precarious nature of the daily fish supply. They were queer consignments

of fish that his wonderful North Sea Company sent to them—twenty soles one day, two whiting the next, and then perhaps for days monsters of the deep that no one had ever seen before. Mrs. White, frightened one morning by the arrival of such sea-serpents, and not in the least knowing how to tackle them, summoned Claire to the kitchen. And Roddy went instead.

He had given her the smartest possible pony and the daintiest of carts, assuring her that it was not only good for her health, but absolutely "the correct thing" to be seen driving every morning in Hyde Park. He said she could leave the cart in charge of Barrett, her groom, and walk about with friends. The more she showed herself, and the cart too, the better pleased he would be. But then he fancied that she was not giving the pony sufficient exercise; so he took to driving himself to the city on fine mornings, rattling along the Embankment in grand style, with the pony stepping out as though the devil was behind it. Titularly the cart remained Claire's very own; only it was not often available for her use. But she had the car, of course—when Roddy did not want that too.

They themselves were giving dinner-parties now, feasting the people who had feasted them, "beginning to pay cutlet for cutlet," as Roddy said; but after a little while Claire was no longer allowed to choose the dishes for these repasts. He said that her notion of a menu was hopelessly on the light side, all fal-lals; not so much as a saddle of mutton from start to finish. One night he vowed that she had made him positively ashamed. It wasn't a dinner at all. And after that painful experience he gradually insisted on having a Lord Mayor's banquet on a slightly smaller scale; getting aid from a famous caterer, and filling the hall and stairs with ponderous hired men in white waistcoats; so that it was all very like a dinner-party at Mrs. Gilmour's, or the Pirbrights', or anywhere

else in that old world of convention, habit, and routine which Claire once thought she had done with for ever.

She was not even allowed to invite her friends, not her real friends. Roddy made a great fuss about the shabbiness and odd, absent-minded manners of Evan Giles, the writer, and said that it was not good enough to ask such a scare-crow to meet people of importance, like the Earl of Kirkstead, the Dowager Countess of Pevensea and Sir Ebenezer Pine. When Claire gently protested that distinguished literary men are not judged by commonplace standards, and that nobody minds what clothes they wear, he said it was all rubbish.

"Besides, Giles was never really distinguished. He was only second-class at the best, and now he's simply a back number"; and he added that he had put himself to the trouble of finding out the true status of Giles. "No, if you must have literary men, why don't you ask Mr. Rudyard Kipling or Mr. Thomas Hardy, the recognized heads of the profession? I bet you'll see them in a decent coat and a properly got-up shirt."

Sometimes the half-hour immediately after the termination of a dinner-party was difficult to get through. As if all the food and wine had suddenly disagreed with him, he inveighed against the guests, the house servants, the hired waiters, everything. Nothing had been wrong really; but, as she knew or guessed, his annoyance was caused by some failure in a business effort of his during the evening. He had hoped for something from one of the guests, had failed to obtain it, and was disappointed.

"Dullest, stupidest crew we have ever had here. I wonder why we bothered to collect such a gang!" And he did not spare her family, if any member of it had been present.

Claire sat with compressed lips, gripping the arms of her chair just as she used to sit in a dentist's chair years ago, determined not to cry out if the pain inflicted almost

killed her. It was curiously painful to hear her mother called "the old woman," Cyril "the cub," and Emily "the full-blown siren."

Yet a few minutes ago he had been amiable, gay, debonair. She could hear his genial laughter down below till the doors closed on the last guest. Whatever he felt, he could be pleasant to other people, could hide his irritation. When he came upstairs again she looked swiftly at his face to see what she herself had to expect.

Why was he so irritable with her, so prompt to take umbrage, so dangerously quick to misunderstand the simplest and most innocent words?

"Oh, damn it, I can't argue with you, Claire."

"But I'm not arguing, Roddy. I only asked you to explain why——"

"I might explain all night without your seeing the point;" and he had a gesture of weariness and discomfort. "Damn it all, I'm tired."

Once her eyes flashed, and she spoke to him in a tone that he had never heard before.

"Be good enough not to swear at me, Roddy. I don't like it."

"What? High and mighty again? On the high horse again?" And he scowled at her.

She was submissive in a moment. At all costs, no quarrel. But quarrels were becoming more difficult to avoid.

Yet still all cited the successful marriage, the idyllically happy couple. Mrs. Gilmour, grown effusive and affectionate now that her youngest child was so completely settled, had not a doubt that every one of her fervent prayers had been granted. It was only for extra satisfaction that she sought from Claire explicit assurances of her bliss. Quite unnecessary, these repeated assurances to her mother, Emily Joyce, and the rest—the dear girl's contented state was so obvious.

No one was more pleased than old Derek Harpington, because he felt that he deserved credit for his handling of initial difficulties. The sight of the joyous couple was grateful to his kindly old eyes. No matter the trouble you take if success crowns your toil. He held forth about it, beamingly, to Mrs. Gilmour and Mrs. Joyce.

"The danger of a love match, in my experience, is that it should prove a flash in the pan. No danger *here*, however. There is not only the ardent affection, and so forth, they *suit* each other."

And he went on to tell of another couple who did not suit each other. It was a case that was giving him a lot of thought and worry; for he had been asked by relatives to intervene and see what he could do. "The Granville Budleighs—their names are no secret." This, too, had been a love match. Indeed, the young man's family were much against it, refusing to recognize the bride, thinking her eccentric; but now all were good friends. Only the two led a cat-and-dog life together—seeming to get on each other's nerves—going for each other in a most embarrassing way before strangers.

"Claire knows them. Stayed at the Pevenseas with them, and I have talked to her about them. I think I must get Claire's help. Perhaps she might be willing to have one or both to stay with her. She might influence the lady, and Roddy could say a word in season to the gentleman. The comfort of *their* married life might be an object-lesson to them."

He wound up by saying to Emily: "They even surpass you and Leonard. For," he added playfully, "I fancy I *have* heard you call poor Leonard over the coals rather sharply."

Emily laughed. "Yes, it's all right so far with Claire and Roddy. But I sometimes ask myself how long it will last."

CHAPTER XI

"WELL," he said, with a laugh, "we have fairly outrun him."

"What do you mean, Roddy?"

"The gentleman in blue. The constable, my dear. We've outrun him so completely that he is left behind out of sight."

They were alone in the oak parlour, and all the evening he had been at his richly-carved oak table, carrying on a sort of audit of their affairs, with bank books, tradesmen's books, and accounts of every description spread out before him.

She went and stood by him, looking down over his shoulder at those red-covered books that were at once her care and torment.

"Do you think we are spending too much money?" she asked disconsolately.

Roddy whistled and shrugged his big shoulders. "That's a rum question for the mistress of a house to ask. I should have thought I might legitimately put the question to you. Don't you trouble to know how we stand from week to week, and month to month?"

She knew nothing really about the general state of their financial position. How could she know? He had refused to have a marriage settlement, carrying everything before him both with the family and the family's solicitors, pretending that he was acting handsomely, assuming the grandest and most magnanimous airs. So, as planned by himself, Claire's income was paid direct into a joint account at the bank. In theory she could draw on this account, and indeed had been given a cheque book for the purpose; but in practice she found it better not to use the

cheque book—at any rate without asking his permission first.

From this account of theirs he borrowed large sums for business needs, such as the purchase of shares to qualify him for the directorate of the fish company, and he paid back the sums when and how he could; he was always paying money in and drawing it out, so that the totals on both sides of the pass book seemed immense, and no one less skilled than a chartered accountant could make head or tail of it. She changed her investments whenever he advised her to do so; she did whatever he told her to do, signing anything that he put before her.

Now, to-night, he was terrible in regard to these household expenses, making her go through the smallest items with him, and when she succeeded in defending herself about pennies, suddenly attacking her with the vast array of pounds.

"No, Roddy, not *one* week, *two* weeks. Don't you remember you said it wasn't convenient to give me the cheque that Saturday, and everything was to stand over for the fortnight?"

Roddy tossed away the tradesmen's books fretfully, got up and moved to the hearth-rug. She sat down again and watched his gloomy, frowning face.

"Well, the thing tells its own story, doesn't it? You can't get away from plain figures."

"I'm sorry," said Claire, in great distress. "I do try. Roddy, I have tried so hard."

"Oh, I expect it's all bad management."

"It's unkind to say that."

"I'm not blaming you. You were never taught anything. Before long I'll engage a regular housekeeper."

"Then what will there be left for me to do? If you take away the management of the house, why——" Her voice broke, and her lips trembled piteously. "Roddy, I

should be shut out of everything. You won't let me help you in your work."

"Nonsense. You're always talking of helping me in petti-fogging ways; but can't you see that the greatest help you are capable of giving me—and that would be real help—is to support my position in the world's eye? Nothing is so valuable to me as to have the right sort of people round me. Use your charms and fascinations to make the big-wigs fond of you, and then for the sake of pretty little Claire they'll take an interest in Master Roddy."

And he laughed. In a moment the gloom had gone and he was jolly and gay. He brought out a large cigar, bit the end off, and began to fill the room with smoke clouds.

But Claire could not change her mood so rapidly. She had been too deeply stirred to be able to forget the seriousness of the questions he had raised.

"If we are living beyond our means, Roddy, let us move into a smaller house—and have fewer servants."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't do at all;" and he spoke in a dignified, lofty style. "I don't choose that my wife should live in a hole-and-corner way. *You* may be contented to take a back seat, but *I* wouldn't be, by any manner of means." Then, as he walked about the room puffing at his cigar, he told her not to worry her head about it any more. He had not intended to imply that they were living beyond their means. Indeed, that was a silly expression, inapplicable to their case, because the means at their disposal would always be increasing. It was only what they called in the city a tightness that required tiding over. "*Pro tem.* we are hard up, and that's a fact, but it doesn't amount to anything." He paused in his walk and stood before her chair, looking down at her smilingly. "The quickest way out would be for the family to come to the rescue. I suggest to you, my ac-

tive little helpmate, that you should go round to Mrs. Gilmour to-morrow morning, explain to her exactly how——"

"Oh, Roddy, don't make me do that." The distress of Claire was greater than before; she looked up at him imploringly. "No, not that. Don't force me to ask mother."

"Why not? She'd rise to the occasion gladly, I'm sure."

"Oh, please not."

"Well, I think you wrong her. But you feel reluctance in asking her?"

"Roddy, I couldn't."

"All right," and he strolled away again. "Not another word. That's enough for me. If you feel you'd rather not do it, I won't ask you to."

"Thank you, Roddy."

She was grateful to him for his leniency in allowing her to escape from an ordeal that her natural reticence, pride, and delicacy of sentiment would have rendered extraordinarily painful.

He had laid stress on the advantages that one can derive from being surrounded by useful friends, and perhaps he was already discontented with the lessening warmth that shone in the faces of some of those important personages under whose roofs they had stayed last autumn. These great folk dined once at least at No. 9 Sedgmoor Street, but few of them dined there again; and, what was worse, some of them gave parties—very large parties, indeed, if one might believe what the newspapers said—to which they omitted to invite the Vaughans. Perhaps they thought that they had already done enough for Derek Harpington's protégés, or they may have been a little scared by the financial magnates assembled at Roddy's generously laden board, or possibly young male relatives bothered them with echoes of that never properly

answered question, "Who the devil *is* Roddy Vaughan?"

Be all this as it may, there certainly came into the mind of Uncle Derek a notion that Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan needed another push behind to keep them moving up the social ladder, and with this aim in view the good-natured old fellow gave a dinner-party in their honour at Hurlingham.

It was a glorious June day. In the fading daylight, all mellow, warm, and beautiful, their highly varnished car carried them under the trees and along the drive to the club-house, where Roddy sprang out with sprightly ease before the footman could get round to open the door, and gracefully and lovingly assisted Claire to descend from her well-cushioned seat. He was almost overwhelmingly magnificent in his morning-coat of a just perceptible blue, his primrose coloured waistcoat, and lavender grey trousers. The primrose tint repeated itself in the upper part of his patent leather boots; that shade of blue on his coat, like the bloom on hot-house grapes, had tempted him to wear a white gardenia in the button-hole; his virginally new silk hat flashed in the slanting rays of the sun when he took it off and showed its glittering clean lining. And he himself was radiant, his quick eye correctly estimating the weight and value of the company that had been invited to meet him. They were real tip-toppers. The size of the elderly ladies' pearls and the queer, old-fashioned garments of three large white-haired men told one at a glance what they were without waiting to hear their grand names.

Roddy's smiles and bows were frank and easy; and as he chatted amiably the undercurrent of his thoughts, had he troubled to find words for them, would have run: "Well, this is *it*. Master Roddy has got there at last. What a lark life is! There's nothing you can't have if you make up your mind that you mean to have it. Fancy me—*me*, Roddy Vaughan—how-de-doing to these nobs, with that pretty creature over there as his wife, with his car, chauf-

feur, and footman round the corner waiting to take him home to his perfectly appointed, fashionably situated London residence!"

Beyond Derek's more exalted guests the party included Mr. and Mrs. Granville Budleigh, that unhappy couple who could not hit it off together, and a handsome but very meretricious Mrs. Kemptown. The other ladies looked askant at her arched eyebrows or red lips, and said among themselves—allowing Claire to share in this confidence—that Mr. Harpington ought not to have invited her.

Roddy sat next to her at dinner, paid her great attention, and got on exceedingly well with her. Indeed, encouraged by a too facile success, and beamed upon by Derek, who loved to see people enjoying themselves, he became boisterous in the mirth that he provoked for and shared with Mrs. Kemptown. She herself laughed so shrilly and heartily towards the end of the repast that others fell silent.

"What's the jest?" asked one of the white-haired nobles politely. "Mayn't we be allowed into it? If it's as good as it seems, it's hard luck to shut us all out of it."

"Certainly not," screamed Mrs. Kemptown, almost suffocating from laughter. And then, recovering a little, she called to Claire merrily across the table. "Mrs. Vaughan, you really ought to keep your husband in order."

Roddy negligently brushed up his moustache with his napkin, and although his eyes twinkled gaily he forced the muscles of his mouth to serious rigidity. He knew that it is bad form to seem too much amused by one's own cleverness or wit.

There was a display of fireworks in the gardens after dinner, and instead of remaining with the rest of Mr. Harpington's party, Roddy and Mrs. Kemptown sauntered away through the crowd and were seen no more. They had

not returned when the party broke up. All the world was going home, and still they were lost. Uncle Derek stood with Claire in the fast-emptying hall until she persuaded him to accept a lift in somebody's car and not trouble any more about her. After that she stood there quite alone. The hall was empty now; lights had been turned out in the rooms behind her; and the club servants were shutting up windows and locking doors. Then at last the wanderers came through the darkness across the gravel and in at the front door.

"Good gracious," said Mrs. Kemptown, with a shrill affectation of alarm, "has everybody gone? But how *dreadful!* And we have kept you waiting. I do hope you don't mind."

Whatever indignation Claire felt, she showed none-whatever. She was calm, quite unruffled, and icily polite to Mrs. Kemptown, who soon began to laugh again.

"This husband of yours is really too beguiling for words. But he is not to be trusted. He lured me into confiding myself to him as a guide round the polo ground, and he has positively walked me off my feet."

They drove her home, Roddy refusing to let down one of the front seats, and preferring to sit between the two ladies. And he and Mrs. Kemptown were very merry and bright, keeping things up till they parted.

"Top-hole evening," he declared, when they had dropped her at her door, a nasty, suspicious-looking door in a by-street near Knightsbridge barracks. "And didn't the old boy do us well, Claire? And isn't that a jolly sort of woman? We ought to cultivate her. . . . Well, don't you agree?"

"No," said Claire quietly, "I think she is a most objectionable sort of woman, and I never want to see her again."

Roddy laughed and snapped his fingers good-humouredly. "Well done. There spoke the true British matron.

I suppose Lady Merstham and the others set you against her. I could see they were all down on her. But you mustn't believe everything you hear—especially about anyone as good-looking as Mrs. K."

A few nights after this, quite late, when Claire was regretfully closing the book that throughout the evening had held her entranced in all his intervals of silence, he spoke to her of the dinner-party that they, like prompt and honest debt-payers, were to give in honour of Uncle Derek. Claire had completed the list of invitations, but now Roddy added another name to it.

"I'll tell you what, Claire. We mustn't be too dull and humdrum this time. We'll have that jolly Mrs. Kemptown to liven us up."

Perhaps instinctively Claire had known that this proposal was coming, and had steadily fortified her determination to contest it. At any rate, she stood firm now, and spoke in a tone of quiet finality.

"No, we can't ask her, Roddy."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't care to have her here. She is not a proper person for me to associate with—and I won't pretend to other people that I don't know it."

"Oh, hoity-toity, what?" He was angry; but he tried to laugh, and he told her that she ought not to be so quick to sit in judgment. Mrs. Kemptown, whatever people said or thought, was probably more sinned against than sinning.

Nevertheless Claire stood firm. She could not now afford to quail before his anger. This was something that she would not allow. If it was in any way her home, she must maintain her right to decide, at least with regard to those of her own sex, what people should enter it and what people should be excluded from it.

But then he told her in explicit words that she was wrong.

"Damn it all, I'm master in my own house; and the sooner you understand that the better."

She winced, and drew back and stood looking at him.

"If that is true, Roddy, and it is altogether your house, then I can't live in it if the master of the house insults me. You must choose. I—I'll go—and I dare say it won't be difficult to persuade Mrs. Kemptown to take my place. She'll be a better manager than I have been—you'll understand each other better—she won't mind when you swear at her. She's used to swearing, no doubt."

"Rubbish. Bosh. Don't talk such rot." Claire's aspect as well as her words had surprised him; but then his anger blazed up again. "No, this is beyond a joke. I don't know what's come to you, to-night." He was walking about the room, and suddenly he paused before her, put his hands in his pockets, and had an ugly snigger. "I thought that you, at least, were above all such nonsense. You usen't to be so squeamish."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, if Mrs. Kemptown is a bit emancipated and ready to cock a snook at conventions, wasn't that your idea, too? Not only for married women, but for——"

"Stop, please."

But he went on.

"Stop," she said again. "Don't say something you'll regret."

But still he went on; telling her in effect that it ill became her to judge the peccadilloes of others harshly, since her own conduct had been so little circumspect. "You were willing enough to throw your cap over the mill, my dear, when you came to me so gaily, and with such a deuced little temptation."

"As long as you live, Roddy, I'll never forgive you for saying that."

She went out of the room, beneath the gorgeous lantern, and up the stairs. He hurried after her, calling to her.

"Claire, old girl, I'm sorry. You're quite right. I oughtn't to have said that. But you nettled me. I don't care two pence whether Mrs. K. comes or not."

Claire had reached the door of her bedroom, and she went into the room and locked the door behind her.

Messrs. Nappensol had spared no pains in making the room worthy of their flatteringly trustful client and the companion with whom he was to share its use.

From an upholsterer's point of view the best bedroom is one of the most important rooms in a house, and when it is being prepared for a newly wedded couple, poetic sentiment as well as trade custom calls for the most fastidious care. The vast bed, so low that it looked even broader than it was, had rich brown woodwork with mouldings and medallions of dull gold; above the head of it there was a canopy or opening tent of silk curtain, with an enormous electric lamp in the apex to shine down upon one like a midnight sun; the velvet pile carpet was so thick that no footfall could sound on it, and double windows prevented disturbance by the faintest murmur of traffic if one wished to lie late of a morning. The material of the window curtains was purple silk, spotted with golden bees, and the same silk, but of a darker tint, filled highly ornate panels on the walls. And in all places throughout the room where Nappensols had not put the chocolate woodwork, the silk, or the gold, they had put looking-glasses; so that as Claire moved restlessly here and there she met advancing towards her, or saw passing by in swift procession, troops of the white-faced young women who were the unsentient reflections of her agitated and unhappy self.

Pale, but with a small patch of feverish colour coming and going in her cheeks, dry-eyed, and feeling that tears

would never again bring exhaustion or relief, she stared at the many-headed misery that surrounded her, that mimicked and mocked her; seeming all of them mutely to ask her why she had locked them up in this carpeted, curtained prison, and how she proposed ever to get them safely out again.

There was no way out. That was what Evan Giles, the thinker, had told her. At least, no way out that she would ever find.

Presently she sat down on a brown and gold chair, bowed her head to avoid the accusing company in the mirrors, and herself began to think clearly and for the first time of the utter and intolerable fiasco that she made of her life.

She thought in bitter shame of all that she had done as an unmarried girl—the going away with him, the unpardonable imbecility of putting herself in his power, and her unquestioning acceptance of the equivocal position when he delayed the marriage. Instinct should have saved her from so compromising herself, even if intelligence failed. But that *he* should revive the sting of such memories! No one with a grain of chivalry in his nature could have reminded her. Yet, if devoid of chivalry, what is a man? With a dreadful lucidity of mental vision she saw and thought about the life-companion that she had chosen for herself.

From the very beginning he had tricked her and fooled her. It was not only in the small things that compose the surface of life they were utterly unsuited to each other. She liked calm and meditation; he liked noise and the gaiety that stifles thought. She loved reading, and he never opened a book—except "Who's Who" or the "Telephone Directory." He had pretended to be fond of music, wrapt in apparent ecstacy while she played Chopin to him; whereas he only cared really for the music of a gramophone or a rag-time band. But beneath the sur-

face lay those deep-flowing hostilities of feeling that could never mingle and run smoothly in a united tide.

Often when he insulted her, he did not even know that he had done it. She was old in worldly wisdom now—both because it was impossible to live with him and not eat the fruit of the tree of evil knowledge, and because of information imparted in those country houses under the strange law which governs commonplace people, and makes them tell everything to a married woman, however young. She knew, then, perfectly well, that he treated her as a mistress rather than a wife; liking her to look smart and draw other men's eyes, suggesting an alcoholic pick-me-up if she was sad, telling her to buy herself a new hat if she seemed worried.

She thought of his minor faults—his familiarity with inferiors, his subservience to rank or wealth. He bullied servants one minute and cringed to any insolently rich Jew the next minute. He " made pals " with waiters over a protracted and expensive meal, and then astounded them by his meanness when the time came to give them their tips. He could be splendid and profuse in the gratification of his own desires, and yet not be able to spend a penny to alleviate the distress of others. He was bound by no traditions of what a gentleman can do and cannot do.

That he took her money as a right, without permission and without thanks, was nothing; indeed in the fine generosity of her nature she would never have noticed or wondered; but that he should dole the money out to her again with a hand so niggardly that it did not supply her immediate needs was a meanness so fantastically vulgar that even now, when she had grown accustomed to suffering by it, it seemed to her almost incredible.

And she remembered their interminable honeymoon—how she had been shaken to her very soul by the physical surrender, the terrible joyless revelation of all that is animal and unexpected in the mystery of our existence;

then the broken, the shattered state of mind which followed her new comprehension that she must make the far more tremendous spiritual surrender to him. He was lord of her mind as well as her body, and she had desperately striven to obliterate the thinking, dreaming creature that she used to be. But all this, of course, he could not understand. He saw no struggle, he took every submission as his right; and all the time, while they trailed their amours half across Europe through the rooms of a hundred hotels, he allowed her nerves no respite or peace. Her virginal innocence was a song that had been sung; something that had been very pleasant to him, like yesterday's dinner, or the bottle of champagne at lunch on the cross-channel steamer, but now over and done with; and wanting something else, he sought with a cruel persistence to awaken and stimulate the sensual cravings that he believed infallibly to exist in all women, no matter what their names or social status. As if teaching her to drink or take drugs, he enticed her to snatch pleasure from what she knew to be the basest sort of degradation. Only love could justify it; and, as she thought now, there was no love. There had never been any real love.

Nevertheless she belonged to him. Once again there was movement in the mirrors; her white face haunted her on every side. She thought with sick longing of the freedom she had blindly forfeited, of the home that had seemed so easy to leave, of the white wall and books and reading-lamp in the room that was truly hers.

She had locked her door here, but she had no right to keep it locked. Soon she must open it. She must not wait till he came across the corridor and beat on its panels, or rattled its handle noisily, and forced her to obey "In the name of the Law." She must open the door; she must consent to a reconciliation after this their first real quarrel.

They made it up; and Roddy quoted poetry.

"'For we fell out, my wife and I, and kissed again with tears' . . . Who wrote that, Claire? I saw it in *The Referee* last Sunday, and the lines struck me. Very good, aren't they?"

But before the reconciliation he had asserted himself. He said the one thing he could not stand was high-and-mightiness. He had had too much of it in the past, and he alluded to the ancient Yorkshire baronet and the contempt with which her relations had treated his own mother. "I warn you, Claire, high-and-mightiness rubs me the wrong way. It rouses all the antagonism in me . . .

"As to Mrs. K., how can you be jealous of such a rival as that? There's nothing you could say against her that I wouldn't say myself. She's just an old painted tart. There! Does that satisfy you? . . .

"No, my little wee darling Claire, you know I put you in a class all by yourself. If I ever even *look* at anybody else, it's sheer fun and frolicsomeness. Nothing more. When I hold you in my arms like this, I wouldn't change places with King Solomon—who had a thousand wives to choose from, didn't he?"

CHAPTER XII

THEIR life went on as before; and Claire passed through queer mental phases, with an emotional instability that was quite new to her.

There were hours when a transient thought of sadness brought tears to her eyes, and other hours in the same day when the most trifling jokes seized upon her sense of humour and amused her inordinately. One day the smallest effort seemed impossible to her; the next day she was restless, overflowing with nervous energy, pining for free movement and swift change of scene.

Sometimes she felt a sudden return of tenderness towards her husband and an inexplicable leniency for his failings. Whatever poor Roddy's faults, it was wrong of her to recognize them, it was wicked of her to magnify them. At any rate he was brave and laborious. He was fond of her. So far as he was capable of affection for any living creature not himself, he felt affection for her. She tried to think of all the things to his credit after her terrible survey of the other side of the account. As praiseworthy qualities should be considered that prompt forgetfulness of snubs and rebuffs, that noisy good-nature which lasted as long as it cost him nothing or there was anything to be gained by it, that jovial joy in life which made every holiday seem a bank holiday.

She preferred unexpected fantastic requests that he could not possibly comply with. Might they go abroad, now, without waiting for the end of the London season? At least would he take her to that Hampshire farmhouse for a week's rest? It would do them both good.

As he explained, he would be unable to leave his work until the middle of August; but to gratify her whims he

gave her two or three Sundays, on which they went for some enormous walks over the Surrey Downs.

In the car he complained rather gloomily that he was forfeiting a day's golf. Then, however, when they had abandoned the car and were fairly in the open, his spirits rose rapidly. He whistled and sang, picked bits of white heather for luck, and with his walking-stick pretended to shoot at all the birds they flushed, whether pheasants or tom-tits.

"Missed him, by Jove, Claire. I'm out of practice. Got him. Right and left that time."

And Claire, tramping along by his side, drinking in the air, the sunlight, the wide map-like view, tried to recover those old feelings of gay comradeship that once had delighted her.

"Grand idea of yours, Claire, this day out in the wilds. It's freshening me up wonderfully."

They sat on a mossy bank between heath and meadow to eat the luncheon that they had brought with them in wallets slung over their shoulders, and he talked to her of bivouacs in South Africa, the fascination of war, the glamour of a soldier's life.

"Now then, fall in." He stood up, and stretched himself. "Lord, how soft I'm getting! Look here;" and he showed her that perspiration had soaked right through the lining and stained the pearl-grey felt of his Homburg hat. "Ready? Then quick—march. Left, right; left, right. Swing your arms and step out Claire."

She walked resolutely, carrying her own wallet, never asking him to slacken his pace in consideration for her lesser stride, refusing the support of his arm when they climbed steep places; but on the last of these excursions she was almost dead-beat by the time that they came down the slopes above the town of Guildford. She could hardly find strength to speak while she sat in the hotel coffee-room sipping a cup of tea and watching Roddy devour a

triple portion of grilled ham and poached eggs. Her stiffened knees made it a great effort to pull herself up into the car for the homeward journey. In the evening she had a sort of heart attack, and the doctor summoned hastily by Pope told her that she must not exhaust herself in this way.

Roddy was attending a club dinner! so he heard nothing of the fainting fit. He did not appear to notice that Claire refrained from suggesting any further Sunday rambles. He had said that he enjoyed them; but he possibly thought that after all they were rather foolish.

Perhaps because of the reaction after that excessive fatigue, perhaps for other reasons, the nervous restlessness as well as the strange variability of mood left her, and she became stoically calm in regard to all matters most intimately related to herself. If she had made a mistake the less she thought about it the better. When you refuse to admit failure you are no worse off than those who have met nothing except success. But by a curious chance at this period, while she was endeavouring to build up something comfortable if not solid from the ruin of her girlish hopes, she was forced to consider the circumstances of two other unfortunate unions.

As well as Uncle Derek, that well-known figure of polite society, the bustling and energetic Lady Paramont, had urged her to speak a word of timely advice or even of reproof to Mrs. Granville Budleigh. These young people were getting on worse than ever; life with them was an almost continuous squabble; and, as they could not keep their differences to themselves, but often prosecuted them in public, Granville's family dreaded the ridicule and scandal that such outrageous behaviour tended inevitably to evoke.

"I begin to think it is her fault now, not his," said Lady Paramont. "She makes him wretched by the lightness of her conduct. I don't mean for a moment that

there's anything *wrong*. But knowing Granville's jealous temperament, she ought not to indulge in anything approaching coquetry. Instead of which she keeps Granville on thorns until he bursts out and they both make a scene. Derek Harpington says you were at the Pevenseas' last year when they made a quite disgraceful scene. Tell me, now, which did *you* think was to blame?"

Claire evaded Lady Paramont's question, but she was obliged to confess that the scene at the Pevenseas' was devastating for its spectators.

"Very well, then," said Lady Paramont, with the decisive amiably implacable tone for which she has long been famous; "and they made absolute idiots of themselves the other night at Mrs. Chaloner's evening-party. Really it cannot be permitted to continue. Why on earth can't they behave like sensible people? They possess everything in the world to make them happy. *She* has now no cause to complain of his relations. I am sure the Ashburys and all of us—Granville Budleigh is my cousin, you know—we have all done an immense deal for her. Then *why?*" And Lady Paramont fixed Claire with her searchingly acute eye. "I ask you why does she do it? For I honestly believe she is the one who is to blame. And I want you, my dear Mrs. Vaughan, to put it to her, and very straightly too, that things cannot go on as they are."

"Oh, Lady Paramont, I couldn't possibly."

"Why not? She likes you, she admires you. She has said so. Derek Harpington believes you would exercise great influence. Have a heart-to-heart talk with her."

And Lady Paramont tacitly refused to leave No. 9 Sedgmoor Street until Claire had promised that, "should the opportunity occur," she would invite Mrs. Budleigh's confidence.

Enid Budleigh herself offered the opportunity by coming to see Claire.

Quite apart from that interest which she felt in the

destinies of all other people, Claire had been drawn towards this young woman at the very beginning of their acquaintance. Enid had dark red hair and large blue eyes; and about her there was something of the slumbering volcano that suggested fire and force even in the midst of surface tranquillity. If you had never seen her flash out at Granville, you would still have known that the volcanic reservoir of fire was there. Reflections of it glowed in her large eyes whenever she spoke of the things that occupied her during the eccentric stage of her career which had made Granville's family at first so shy of her.

She spoke now, and very enthusiastically, of those past days; adding, with a sigh of regret, "Yes, I gave up all that for Jack. Of course, he did not tell me that he was the most irritating man alive."

Then, diffidently, Claire insinuated a word or two in favour of Jack.

"Till you live with a man," said Enid, "you never know what he is like."

This truism struck Claire with such force that she became silent for a few moments. Then she went on to hint that perhaps her friend was a little hard on Jack.

In reply Enid Budleigh said some very strange things.

"If Jack ever played the fool I should chuck him. He knows that."

"But, Mrs. Budleigh, you speak as if it would be possible for you to leave him and to make him let you go. It isn't, is it?"

Mrs. Budleigh smiled enigmatically. "I might give him no choice."

"Do you mean you would not shrink from going through the divorce court?"

Mrs. Budleigh leaned back her head, and laughed as if much amused. "Don't you worry about us, Mrs. Vaughan—but it's awfully kind of you. Jack and I are real pals, though we sometimes chip each other." And looking at

Claire with a whimsical expression, she said: "I suppose you have heard people talking about us. I know they do talk—and it's all the fault of Jack's stupid relations. His relations had much better leave us alone. It's the greatest mistake to interfere with people."

That was the case of Enid and Granville: baffling, enigmatic, and not to be taken too seriously.

The other case concerned Claire much more nearly, since it related to the domestic affairs of Barrett the groom and Thompson the chauffeur. One day, while the car stood waiting outside the house, these two, egged on by the other servants, had an altercation which would have ended in a fight but for the timely arrival of a policeman, who took everybody's name and address and promised to call upon Mr. Vaughan in the evening.

Pope and the others were only too eager to explain the cause of "the unpleasantness" and to congratulate Claire on its having come to a head. Till now, as they explained, their tongues had been tied; but now at last they could speak. The chauffeur some time ago had gone to lodge with Barrett and his wife—always a doubtful, risky arrangement—and of late the preference of the landlady for the lodger had been the talk of the whole mews. They carried on anyhow. And naturally one wondered why Barrett put up with it and when it was going to be stopped.

Claire was shocked and distressed. On paying visits to the mews with sugar for the pony she had seen Mrs. Barrett, a clean, nice-looking young woman; had noticed, too, the tidy aspect of the sitting-room with its white curtains and geranium plants and well-swept hearth; had even caught a glimpse of the chauffeur seated at table enjoying the comfortable mid-day meal provided by Mrs. Barrett. It was upsetting to learn of guilty secrets beneath this fair exterior.

Moreover, she was attached to the injured husband for

sentimental reasons. Barrett belonged to her past; he had been helper at Mrs. Gilmour's stables.

"What is to be done?" she asked Roddy, after he had investigated the matter.

"Well," said Roddy, "we can't let them go on living in open sin. It isn't respectable. No, one of them has to go; and as Thompson is much the most useful of the two, it must be Barrett."

"Oh, Roddy!"

"A good chauffeur is a rare bird nowadays. Whereas you've only to whistle to find half-a-dozen smarter-looking grooms than Barrett. If you are thinking of the pony——"

But Claire was not thinking of the pony; she was thinking of the man. It seemed to her more than unkind, really wrong, to dismiss the innocent Barrett and retain the guilty Thompson.

"Oh, that's all right," said Roddy. "Barrett's a sensible chap. When I gave him notice he said he quite understood."

Next day Claire had an interview with Barrett, told him how sorry she felt for him, and talked about his future. He was young, as she reminded him; when the law had set him free he might marry again; and, getting a better wife, be quite happy in the end. But Barrett surprised her by replying that he would have nothing to do with the law.

"You're very kind to think of it, ma'am," said Barrett, with his well-remembered husky voice and grateful smile. "But I shan't go and make a worse fool of meself than what she's made of me a'ready. She's took her choice. Well, so be it. No law for me."

"But, Barrett, if you don't get a divorce, you can never marry."

"I know that, ma'am, and I shan't practice any deception. If I should meet a girl that I took to, if she

took to me, I should just tell her the facts, precisely how I'm situated." And Barrett cleared his throat. "If she wasn't for it without her marriage lines, well, she could leave it alone. You'll excuse me speaking so open."

"Oh, yes." Claire had flushed slightly, but she drove away all false delicacy. She was interested in Barrett, and she wanted to help him. "But suppose you did that, Barrett, and you had children, they—they would be illegitimate."

"Well, they wouldn't be the only ones. They must take their chance of it."

"Really, Barrett, I think you ought to get a divorce."

"And how d'you suppose I'm to get it, ma'am? They aren't given away—far from it." Having cleared his throat again, he spoke loudly and with strong feeling. "It's very kind, but you don't understand, ma'am. Divorce is for the upper classes, not for our sort. Suppose I put meself in a lawyer's clutches over it, why, he'd take every bob out of me what I could earn for ten years, and then he wouldn't do it. Laugh at me, too, if I asked him where all my money had gone. Who is it gets divorces? If you read the papers you'll see—people as can afford it. I don't say if Jessie had bin got hold of by some rich gentleman like Mr. Vaughan or Mr. Cyril, and there was the prospect of damages, but what the lawyers would do it for me in such circumstances as *that*. But how much damage is Thompson going to pay? 'Take it out of me with your fists,' would be his answer. And so I would too," said Barrett, with a lurid glow, "on'y that would be punishing Jessie as much as him. . . . Thank you, ma'am, all the same."

"I must think about it, Barrett. I don't like letting you go with nothing done to put things straight for you."

And thinking about it, she asked Roddy how much a divorce for Barrett would really cost.

"Fifty pounds. A hundred. Even more, I dare say."

"Not more than that!" And she asked Roddy if they could not pay this amount for Barrett themselves.

"What?" said Roddy, almost shouting. "Chuck away a hundred pounds? Do you suppose hundreds grow on every bush like berries or flutter down at my feet like leaves as I go to the City? But you're joking, of course?"

"No, I'm not joking, Roddy. It seems so dreadful to let the whole thing slide." And she told him the things that Barrett had said.

"And there's a good deal of truth in that," said Roddy. "Yes, that's the poor man's grievance against the law. Devilish hard luck, it seems. I quite agree. But we can't help it. It's not *our* fault. They'll amend the law, no doubt, one of these days. Meantime——" And Roddy yawned, and presently began to talk of something else.

For a day or two Claire worried herself greatly about this poignant drama of humble life; it filled her mind with painful thoughts. She must do something to remove difficulties from Barrett's future career, to prevent little innocent children from being born with the stigma of illegitimacy. It would be easy to raise a hundred pounds by the sale of a few trinkets; and she had determined to brave Roddy's displeasure and seek advice from Messrs. Collie, her family's solicitors, when she found that Barrett had cut the ground from under everybody's feet by sailing for Canada. She received this intelligence from Mrs. Barrett, at the mews, as she approached her pony's stall with a lump of sugar in her hand.

The pony had gone too—not to Canada but to Roehampton. Mr. Vaughan had been round with the gentleman, and they had made a lot of fun together over the sale of the pony, "chaffing like."

"But Mr. Vaughan told Thompson he got the price he asked from the beginning."

Mrs. Barrett, giving all this information, was neat and

clean-looking as ever, quite unruffled in manner by consciousness of the recent unpleasant events. Through an open doorway Claire had a glimpse of Thompson just sitting down to his carefully prepared repast; the lodger, the cuckoo in the nest, the unabashed and triumphant possessor of all that did not belong to him.

Claire went away feeling helpless and disgusted.

Lassitude fell upon her. The season was now over; there were no more parties or entertainments; she often escaped even the trouble of ordering dinner, for Roddy generally dined at his club. Invitations to country houses had not so far arrived, no plans for holidays had been made; although Roddy had talked of Italy, Greece, and Ireland. But Claire did not remind him. All desire for movement, travel, adventure had faded. She wanted quiet; she wanted peace.

She would become so much absorbed in a book as to forget time, herself, the whole world of reality; this fiction was all that mattered; the joy or grief of these imagined personages alone concerned her. Then in a moment the illusion was gone; she sent the book back to the library without troubling to finish it. The external world in its turn captivated and held her attention; so that merely to sit looking out of the window was sufficient to keep her interested, entranced. Sedgmoor Street was the universe in little. Each passer-by was mankind. Within each house lay the mystery and wonder of the entire planet.

August had nearly gone, and already the evenings were closing in, when Roddy announced that he could now leave London. It was at dusk, and he came noisily into the big drawing-room and talked so volubly that he almost took her breath away.

"What are you moping in the dark for? Blind man's holiday, eh?" And he turned on a blaze of electric light. "Now, old girl, you've got to pull up your socks, and get

a move on. I have plotted great deeds. I am going to do an American campaign."

"American campaign?" she echoed feebly.

Then, with exuberant satisfaction, he told her how he had decided that they should spend the autumn in the United States; he had long been wanting to open out business relations with big men over there; he intended to impress himself on New York.

"Roddy, I can't go with you. You must go alone."

"Rubbish. Of course you must come. I *want* you. I couldn't do it without you." And he rattled on, explaining that his elegant partner was an essential part of the scheme. They were to go out there as ultra-fashionable people, two English bloods travelling for pleasure, and only after they had made their society success would he attempt operations in the financial world. She must at once write to all the American friends they had met over here; she must bustle about and get introductions from big-wigs. Also she had better buy some really slap-up frocks—ready-made of course, as there was no time now for measuring and trying on. "Buy some real eye-openers, Claire. Hang the expense. Buy dresses that people can't get away from. I want us to be talked about and written about from the word Go. I want us to fairly knock the Yanks, between us."

"Roddy, I can't. I—I am going to have a baby."

"Oh, damn," said Roddy, and he sat down and stared at her. All the expansive gaiety passed from his face; he looked gloomy and disappointed, like a child who hears that his little treat must be given up. "Well, I'm blowed. When is it to be?"

"The end of January, I think."

His face lit up again. "January! Why, bless me, that's five months. My dear old girl, you don't need to lie in the straw from now till then. *You'll* be all right. The voyage will do you good."

"No, I couldn't stand the fatigue. Besides, I should be no use to you. I—I couldn't look nice. I—I couldn't wear the sort of dresses you thought of."

"Well, upon my word, this *is* a let-down—at the very moment I was counting on you. Why didn't you tell me before.

"I don't know. I wasn't sure—so I waited—and then——" She sat looking at him, watching his gloomy face. "Roddy, didn't you want us to have any children?"

"Of course I did. I should be something less than a man if I didn't. You funny old thing, what odd remarks you make sometimes." He got up, laughed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yet you aren't glad, Roddy. You are sorry."

"Nonsense. I'm delighted. And proud as a peacock, too—proud as several peacocks." He walked about the room, talking of the marvellous piece of news, and as he talked recovering his good humour. Gradually the notion of fatherhood began to please him so much that he forgot the annoyance caused by the frustration af a well-devised scheme. He, Roddy Vaughan, was about to put into the world a little creature fashioned in his own image; he had felt a little down on his luck lately, but now he thrilled with that sensation of unexpectedly increased importance which was always so grateful to him. And he remembered opportunely the conversation of a shrewd old man called Fergusson on a Castle Line steamer years ago. This old chap had said one night in the smoking-room that you never really make a woman your own till you have had a child by her. Claire was going to be his now, "with a vengeance."

His affectionate protestations were quite genuine, therefore, when presently he sat upon the sofa beside his wife, smoothed her hair, kissed and patted her cheeks.

"You little sly-boots. *This* up your sleeve, and never

tell me! What next? Which is it to be—boy or girl? Let it be a boy if it's all the same to you. What a lark! Roddy Number Two, what? You dear Claire, you have made me more proud and happy than you guess."

At dinner he made not a single complaint about the food. Indeed he vowed that the *poulet en casserole* was excellent and urged her to have some more of it, adding meaningly that henceforth she needed as much nourishment as she could get.

After dinner he spoke with magnanimous gentleness about the abandoned American trip. "Certainly I shan't go by myself. Do you think I should desert you at such a time, Claire? No, I renounce the whole plan. Washout! Now I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll have a fortnight together at Hastings, and then I'll go to Scotland and get some shooting."

And he went on with a description of that uncle and aunt of his who kept the Bolingbroke Hotel at Hastings.

"We may as well give them a turn. They'll take it as a compliment my bringing you to see them. Strictly speaking, I suppose I ought to have asked them to our wedding; but they would have been fish out of water, and, of course, I don't pretend they are—well, *you* know."

Now, however, one could do them a civility and prevent their feeling hurt.

So together they went to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Girdlestone at the Hastings hotel; and Claire sat upon the pier while Roddy played golf at Rye and read her book in their sitting-room while he enlivened the evening in the parlour behind the bar. Mrs. Girdlestone used to come into the sitting-room, apologize for neglecting Claire, and beg her to ask for anything she wanted. "You see how busy we are, don't you? And will make allowances if I don't give you the attention I could wish?" Mr. Girdlestone, who breathed stertorously, came to their table at dinner, inquired after their appetites, and whispered ami-

ably to Claire: "You've got a rare rammucky spark in Master Roddy, and I hope you don't trust him further than you can see him."

"You get on, you old grampus," said Roddy merrily, "and don't try to take my character away. Funny thing I didn't turn out wicked with you for an example when I was a boy."

And it was not till the visit was over and they were driving to the railway station in the hotel omnibus that Claire discovered it had been a real visit and they had been hotel guests otherwise than in the usual acceptation of the term, with nothing to pay.

"They did us all right, didn't they?" said Roddy. "A fortnight free gratis! That's a bit of economy for once."

CHAPTER XIII

THE servants were taking their holidays, and Claire had the ornate Nappensol house almost to herself. One might say that she had not only the house, but Sedgmoor Street and the whole neighbourhood also; for all the world was away. Hans Place seemed fast asleep; Cadogan Square was mournful and silent as a large red-brick cemetery; troops of little boys with sticks searched the emptiness of Sloane Street for fallen chestnuts; and the church had the aspect of a place of business altogether closed until trade should be resumed again when weddings next came into season.

For the good of her health Claire used to take long solitary walks, beyond the river sometimes, to the windy expanses of Battersea Park. She had no sense of loneliness now. The whole external pageant of existence had become rich with new meanings for her; even at this dead time of year, with shrivelled leaves scurrying along the pavements to meet her, and the first cold breath of winter chilling her face, she could see and feel the marvellous message or promise of life in all things—life that is ever renewing itself, the life of the future, that cannot be obliterated by the death of each passing hour.

As she stood watching the seagulls make their white circles above the bridge, or children that played and ran beside the embankment wall, or beyond all else, infants carried in women's arms, deep wells of tenderness and love seemed to gush forth in her almost frozen heart. Ineffable thoughts filled her mind. Nature is not blindly cruel, but inscrutably kind: when we suffer most we are learning the measure of a nobler joy.

At such moments she had an immense longing to speak

of the secret that was mysteriously changing all the world for her. Against reason, in defiance of memory, she felt an elemental yearning for her mother's counsel and sympathy. She wanted to put her arms round Mrs. Gilmour's neck, and whisper about what was going to happen next January; to say in effect, "Mother, you put the torch of life into my hand, and I am giving it into the hands that shall carry it on when you and I have ceased to be."

But, as she knew, or, as she thought she knew, Mrs. Gilmour was still on the continent with Emily and Leonard Joyce, enjoying one of those extended tours that had been talked about so often, and always postponed until Claire herself was "out of the way."

She could scarcely believe the evidence of her eyes, therefore, when she saw Mrs. Gilmour just ahead of her, turning the corner of Hague Street, and pacing slowly and reflectively towards home. Dusk had fallen, and in the half light Claire, for a moment, thought that she must really be mistaken, and that this meditative, dignified figure was only a servant attired in some of Mrs. Gilmour's cast-off garments. But the stately figure paused, seemed to look up and down the street vaguely, as if its mind had wandered, and it did not quite know where it was or what it proposed to do next. Then, with a little start, as of returning consciousness, it passed up the steps and rang the door bell. It was Mrs. Gilmour and nobody else.

"Mother! What a surprise!"

Claire had pursued as rapidly as she dared, and stood with her mother on the steps, while a new young footman watched them from the open door, wondering who the missis's pretty lady friend might be.

"My dear Claire, it is *you* who surprise me," said Mrs. Gilmour graciously. "You drop upon me out of the clouds, quite unexpectedly. But I'm very glad to see you, dear."

Claire's heart overflowed to the warmness of this welcome. It was more especially pleasant to her because, during the last half-year, Mrs. Gilmour's manner had grown cold and reserved; as if, after the first ardour of satisfaction in the happy marriage, something had occurred to make her look upon Claire with far less pride and affectionate interest.

She followed her mother meekly through the well-remembered rooms, and sat by a cheerful wood fire in the morning-room, while Mrs. Gilmour ambled to and fro, talking, divesting herself of her cloak and hat, and handing them to the maid who had come to fetch them.

"What is it, Yates? Oh, yes, you want my scarf too. Unpin it for me, please."

The house was just the same, and yet to Claire's eyes so incredibly altered. She understood that the change lay in herself, and not in these familiar objects. She thought of the shy, childish Claire that used to wander aimlessly through this and the other rooms, and it seemed to her that a hundred years had passed since then; that she, the woman who had tasted bitter fruit, the disillusioned wife, the hopefully expectant mother, should be unrecognizable by those who had known the girl. The solemnly respectful greeting of her old friend Belton, when he came to receive certain confidential orders from his mistress, did not dissipate this fancy.

"Tea," said Mrs. Gilmour gaily. "I was talking to Belton about tea. The fact is—Emily would blow me up and pretend it was insufficient, although at my age I *think* I ought to be the best judge—but when I am alone like this, I do not have a regular dinner. It is a relief to the servants, and, whatever anybody may say, it suits me *better*. I have my tea a little later, and I *add* to it what I like, and what I have always considered extremely sustaining. You would not guess what I have ordered for myself to-day;" and she looked at Claire

with an air of modest triumph, as if enjoying the sense of her resourcefulness and fertility of invention. "A couple of boiled eggs!"

"I think I might have guessed," said Claire, smiling, "if you had given me time, mother."

"Only on this occasion, I have told Belton *four* eggs instead of two, and you must join me. Claire, I insist. We will go into the dining-room and have our meal comfortably. I think tea, when you can sit down to it quietly, is so much preferable to the usual sketchy arrangement —you know what I mean, people carrying about their tea-cups, and, 'Won't you have a slice of this cake?' Or, 'Do try the ratafias.' Emily and I have a particular name for it. But you remember, of course. 'If possible,' Emily always says, 'do let us have a *schoolroom* tea.' So now, being quite alone here, I indulge in the practice every evening."

"But, mother, I want to know why you are here at all. I thought you weren't coming back from Italy till the middle of November."

"I did not go to Italy, Claire."

"Oh, why? Emily said it was all settled."

"I gave it up," said Mrs. Gilmour, walking about with her hands clasped behind her back. "I had to let Emily and Leonard go without me. The expense was too great— coming on top of everything else. I could not afford it. I was completely cleared out of funds."

"Really, mother? But what was it made you short of money like that?"

Mrs. Gilmour paused in her walk, and looked at Claire fixedly and with a somewhat severe eye.

"I wonder that you ask me, Claire"; and she moved away again. "Suffice it to say that I had met heavy and unexpected claims. I prefer not to think of it. Please do not reopen the matter."

She went on talking; but Claire was conscious of a

change in her manner. All the warmth and friendliness had gone; the coldness, noticed so many times of late, had returned again.

"Mother, I can't understand——"

"Never mind, my dear. Come and let us have our eggs. You are ready for us, Belton?"

In the dining-room, when Belton left them alone, and when Mrs. Gilmour was well on with her second egg, Claire asked more questions. Want of money in this house was something so odd and unnatural that it really required a full explanation.

"Mother dear, I hate to think of your losing your holiday, and for such a reason. Do tell me. Have investments gone wrong—or is it Cyril?"

"Cyril," said Mrs. Gilmour, bridling, "had to be extricated—no matter what the cost."

"Extricated?"

"You know the story, don't you? Didn't Emily tell you?"

"Emily tells me nothing about you all. And she scarcely ever comes to see me."

"Well, it need be no secret from you. Happily it is over and done with."

And Mrs. Gilmour plaintively related the circumstances of Cyril's entanglement with an actress. Madly in love with this young person, he had foolishly and very wrongly proposed marriage; then, when he had been persuaded to withdraw his rash proposal, they were threatened with an action for breach of promise, and finally Mrs. Gilmour had settled it out of court. The affair had been terribly expensive; but anything was better than a scandal, and having one's name in the papers.

"Or such an unfortunate marriage," said Claire, comfortingly. "It was something that Cyril consented to give her up."

"He did," said Mrs. Gilmour. "But, between you

and me, Claire, I fear it was only because he had fallen in love with somebody else. The stage has become an absolute infatuation with him. Goodness knows how it will end." And she sighed.

"That was the first thing that crippled me," she continued presently. "Then there are those leasehold houses —simply a morass in to which money has to be poured. And the unfairness of it! The leases are running out, and in a few years the ground landlord will attempt to take them away from me altogether. I say to Mr. Collie, 'Do you mean to allow a considerable portion of my income to be confiscated without making an effort to prevent it?' And he just shrugs his shoulders, and says we are powerless and it is the law of the land. Claire, never talk to me about solicitors. Believe me, the more respectable they are, the more incompetent. It has always been the same story with Collies—even in your father's time. But *he* could keep them up to the mark. Now, however, that I have no one to lean on——"

Agitated by this doleful thought, she put down her egg-spoon, rose to her feet, and began to wander round the dining-table.

"Claire, you don't understand what it is to be thrown on your own resources unaided. You, who have a husband still living to manage business matters for you, to guard your interests and protect you from imposture! When you are left alone, an old woman in my position, you will find that the whole world seems to regard you as fair game, to extort—— Oh, and that reminds me. But I intended not to touch on it." She picked up her tea-cup, took a sip or two standing, and over the brim of the cup stared at Claire severely. Then she restored the cup to its saucer with an air of decision. "Yes, I will speak frankly. Claire, you really must not send Roddy to me again."

"Mother," cried Claire, aghast, "what do you mean?"

"I mean that if you outrun the constable, as Roddy terms it, you must catch him up without further assistance from me."

"Mother, I never——" But then Claire became silent, and hung her head. She had been about to protest against this accusation, and declare her entire innocence. No, that would not do: she could not disavow what her husband had done in their joint names. If necessary, she must bear the shame of it for both. In a moment she understood everything, remembering very clearly how, when she had begged that no appeal for money might be made to her mother, he seemed to sympathize with her reluctance, and had said that if she did not care to make such an appeal, she must not do it. But he had done it himself. While she had been feeling a glow of gratitude towards him for his kindness, he was remorselessly achieving the end in view. Each word, as Mrs. Gilmour went on talking, added to her confusion and distress.

"It is all very nice to have fine and extravagant decorations in one's house, but then I say one should not call upon other people to pay for them. If Messrs. ——. What is their name?——dun for their money, that should have been provided for beforehand. It is all very well for Roddy to gratify your fancies and wish to house you like a queen, as he says; but, then, is it fair to hold a pistol to my head and make me pay the bill? I was not consulted beforehand—no, not invited to choose so much as a single wall-paper. I do think, Claire, when launching out with these odd-named people, Napper—Napping—whatever it is—I do think you might have asked me for my sanction—*in* the circumstances."

"I am sorry, mother."

"Well, of that *first* time, I say no more. One does not have to furnish a house every year—as he puts it. But the *second* time, Claire, within only a few months! No, that is too much. So I put it to you, frankly, Claire;

you have not the right to continue such an extravagant mode of life—astonishing everybody, and making even Emily a little envious—unless your means justify it, or, at least, until Roddy comes into his fortune. *I* cannot go on 'saving the situation,' as he terms it. I have done all I could, and it is not fair to ask me to do more."

"Mother, I am so sorry—so very sorry."

"Then we will say no more. Claire! You have left *both* your eggs untouched! Will you not have some marmalade? It was sent to me by Uncle Derek. It is the marmalade they have at one of his clubs. I forget which club—he belongs to so many—but he says it is the best marmalade in England."

Claire took her leave without trying the marmalade, and without confiding to her mother the secret that just now had seemed so great and so important. It seemed of very little consequence now. She went back to Sedgmoor Street feeling weary, lonely, and ashamed.

Before going to bed she wrote a long letter to Roddy, in Scotland; reproaching him for what he had done, telling him how bitterly she regretted his having done it without her knowledge, and imploring him never to do it again. She acquainted him, too, with the cruel consequence of his acts—Mrs. Gilmour's loss of a summer holiday.

At night she could not sleep because of her thoughts about this disaster. Poor mother, deprived of the pleasant continental tour with Emily; alone when all London was away; having eggs for tea instead of a *table d'hôte* dinner, with no one to stimulate conversation except Belton or Yates.

But Roddy, in his reply from Scotland a few days later, treated the episode very lightly.

He affected to believe it had been arranged between them that he was to ask the favour, since she felt shy about asking. "I took it on myself, in order to spare your sus-

ceptibilities, although they appeared to me quite out of place."

"Of course," he added, "it all rubbish for the old lady to pretend she is hard up. I wish I had half her complaint." And he concluded his letter by saying that he was homeward bound now, and that he proposed to take Yorkshire on the way, for the purpose of looking in upon the baronet, his great uncle. She was to send him immediately her best photograph, so that he might show to the head of the house a portrait of his new niece. "I hope to make it up with him once for all," said Roddy, with characteristic hopefulness. "It is time we buried the hatchet."

CHAPTER XIV

HE had returned from the North, and was engrossed by his City labours again. He had not visited Yorkshire, and he looked glum when Sir Roderick was mentioned. Evidently the old man had refused the chance of an affectionate meeting, and the hatchet remained above ground. Roddy spoke of being out of luck and up against adverse conditions; but when Claire asked sympathetic questions, he told her to mind her own business.

"If there is anything calculated to put a man off his game and knock the courage out of him, it is incessant advice from a woman—and an ailing woman at that. It would take me a month to explain the difficulties of my position, and the large interests involved—and you wouldn't understand even after that."

Then, one evening in November, when he came into the house, it was as though half a dozen other angry, shouting men had entered it with him. He bellowed at the scared servants; he filled the hall and staircase with noise. Claire, upstairs in the drawing-room, sat trembling as the noise ascended, drew nearer, and burst upon her.

"Look at this. Just read it. See what the old devil has done to bowl me out and ruin me."

It was the news in the evening papers that had driven him to frenzy. He brought with him several newspapers, all crumpled and torn, and thrust one of them into Claire's shaking hands.

"Read it. See for yourself."

And Claire, with wildly anxious eyes, read the announcement of the marriage of an ancient Yorkshire baronet—"May and December. . . . Sir Roderick, who has never

been married before, is eighty-three, while the bride as yet has numbered only twenty summers. . . . A romantic interest attaches to the union in the fact that Miss Banks was born upon the estate. Her father acts as steward or bailiff to the home farms," and so on.

Claire's first sensation was one of immense relief, her impulse to say, "Is that all?" But a glance at Roddy's face kept her heart still beating fast. There must be a solid cause for such furious emotion.

"Roddy, of course it—it's a blow to your hopes—perhaps. But will it necessarily mean——"

"It will mean that I am in the soup," he bellowed. And he went raving and roaring out of the room.

At dinner he was calmer; but he inveighed against the elderly bridegroom in such outrageous terms that Claire told the servants to leave them alone and they would wait on themselves.

"Roddy, don't—please don't say these things. What good can it do?"

"Oh, I can't be mealy-mouthed about it. Curse the lascivious old brute. Curse the whole dirty crew of them."

"Roddy, don't—oh, don't be so violent. You—you are upsetting me—you are making me ill."

"Fancy being able to get a clergyman to countenance and abet him in such beastliness. It *is* beastliness at his age. Why, it isn't a marriage at all. What is marriage for but the begetting of offspring? and what's the chance of offspring, I ask you, with a worn-out, dried-up old stick of eighty-three? In love with her be blowed. It's just senile lustfulness—gone dotty after a pig-tail and a petticoat; and instead of getting him a nurse or a keeper to make him behave himself, they ring the bells and march him off to church and give him a blessing. I'd like to be behind that parson—his cloth wouldn't save him till I'd kicked him round the churchyard and up the village street. Disgrace to the Church! Not marriage—profanation."

And Roddy spluttered and fumed, at the end of his tirade.

After dinner, in the oak parlour, he sat down at his desk and brought out masses of papers. He was quiet now. The rage had burnt itself out, and he seemed to be a prey to acute anxiety.

"I must think what I can do," he murmured. "I must try to think how the situation is to be saved."

Claire was watching him intently, and she understood that he was more than anxious, he was afraid. For the first time she could see fear in his eyes and hear it in his voice. And this fear communicated itself to her, shook her, so that she leaned against the big desk for support. She stood there, white and trembling.

"Roddy, tell me everything. I'm your wife. Don't keep things back from me."

"There's nothing to keep back. Why are you looking at me like that? Come here. Sit down, and listen."

He had said that it would take months to explain the state of affairs, but now, in two minutes, he was able to give her a notion of his financial position. He had been trading on his expectations from Sir Roderick, putting them forward as much more solid than they were, bolstering up his credit with stories of future opulence. Now, obviously, since the old brute had taken a wife, he had somebody nearer than a great-nephew to whom he could bequeath his wealth. To-morrow, when the published news had gone round, Roddy would have all his creditors upon him.

"Your creditors?"

"Yes," said Roddy, stroking his moustache; "unless I can persuade them that it will make no difference to me in the end."

"Do you owe a lot of money?"

"Well, yes, added up it mounts—all round."

"The tradesmen are paid. We owe nothing for this house."

"Except for everything that's in it."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, Nappensol. They've had nothing but driblets —a hundred at a time to keep them quiet; and their account is a matter of thousands."

"But my mother! What she gave you the first time was to go to Nappensols."

"It didn't go to them. It went to keep the pot boiling."

"Roddy! Why, why, that wasn't honest. It was getting money under false pretences. Suppose she finds out?"

"Oh, I'm not bothering about *her*. I don't care if she finds out or not. I'm thinking of others."

And again she saw the vacillation of his eyes, the nervous movement of his lips, the expression of a person perplexed and alarmed, as he begins to recognize the extent of the danger with which he is threatened. And again, too, fear seized her.

"Roddy," she said desperately, "tell me the truth. I've a right to know."

"I *have* told you. Can't you see, that if people begin dunning me for immediate payment—a whisper against my credit will ruin me in half my business?"

"Yes, but whatever we owe we can pay. We *must* pay, of course—no matter what sacrifice we make. Only there's more than that in your mind. What is it? Trust me."

He shrugged his shoulders and was going to get up, but she clung to his arm.

"Roddy, you are frightening me—and I can't stand it. What have you done that puts you in such horrible difficulty? Tell me. You are my husband—and I mustn't blame you, whatever it is. I must only try to help you."

Then he explained how his principal embarrassment arose from the fact of his having allowed a few people to suppose that old Sir Roderick's money was settled on

him, and not merely an expectation. This marriage might set them asking awkward questions.

"Understand, Claire. I have said nothing in black and white;" and he pulled at his moustache nervously. "No, I've not put my foot in it to that extent. There is nothing in black and white. But I certainly have conveyed the impression by word of mouth. So there you are."

"Could they prosecute you?"

"No, of course not. That's so like a woman. Worm out everything; then miss the point. What rubbish! The *law* can't touch me—not such a fool, my dear, as to get pinched *that* way. No, I'm absolutely safe. Only, as I've told you a dozen times already, it's awkward for my credit. My whole life is built on credit. Knock that from under me, and down I go. There, that's more than enough. I must think now."

But she would not release his arm or let him get up from his chair.

"Roddy," she wailed; and, sinking to the floor, she laid her face upon his knee and sobbed convulsively.

He was not honest. She had always known by instinct, infallibly, that at heart he was a swindler and a cheat; and yet the confirmation of her knowledge, coming from his own lips, seemed too bitter to support. Nevertheless, she was sorry for him. Pity and kindness irresistibly moved her. Elemental womanhood softened every thought, so that her tears soon became a mere explosion of nervous force, a relief after strain rather than a sign of revolt or disgust. Good or bad, he was her husband, and in sore trouble and affliction.

"Claire," he was saying, "get up. Don't make a theatrical ass of yourself. Stop that row. The servants will hear you and wonder what's wrong."

As if they had not heard himself, and been wondering for the last three hours. But the astounding irony of this caution was not noted either by him or her.

"Yes, Roddy, I will—I will." She had got up, and was drying her eyes. "Now I'll be quiet and sensible;" and sitting in the chair by his side, she took his hand and held it with both her hands. He could feel her fingers tightening and relaxing their grip spasmodically, a pulsation that she could not control while she talked to him eagerly.

"If you're safe, and we're not going to be disgraced, I don't mind. You must pay them to the last farthing and then, for heaven's sake, Roddy, let us start our lives on a new plan."

And she implored him to cease his frantic hunt for wealth, and be satisfied with competence; to leave this expensive house and live modestly without show; to get rid of all pretence, and pay their way like honest citizens.

"Impossible," he said. "I must keep up appearances."

"Oh, why, Roddy? That has been your fatal error. There's no need—— And, Roddy, I feel it, I know it, we don't keep up appearances really. We don't deceive people. They see through it, and laugh at us. They *must* do. Roddy, don't disregard what I'm saying. It's true—it's wise. When you force me to invite people here—you know, people that are not in our world, the big-wigs, as you call them—well, they are only surprised."

"Are they? They never showed it."

"Not to us. But from their point of view it is almost an impertinence. They tell each other we might have waited for them to ask us. And, Roddy, however hateful it sounds, they must set us down as snobbish, thick-skinned, common. And we oughtn't to do it, we needn't do it. Educated people shouldn't behave like that. We should be above it—you and I, Roddy."

He sat listening gloomily, and bit his lip and frowned.

"Well, if we were living in a little house out of the beaten track—living for ourselves, Roddy—there'd be no temptation. We *couldn't* do it. Let's live for ourselves.

Let's try, anyhow. Take me out of it, Roddy, for my sake, if not for yours. Save me from these humiliations and fears and torments."

"Oh, pile it on."

"Roddy, don't be angry. I can't help it. Perhaps this—what has happened—is our chance, a blessing if we make it one. Do what I say. Begin again—we may be happier then. We aren't going to be happy this way—your way. Roddy, I swear I'll try my hardest. And let me help you. I *can* help you if you'll only trust me. Don't shut me out of the work that is your life. Give me a share in it. Don't believe the nonsense about women being useless to advise, or incapable of understanding. I can help you, Roddy. I can keep you *straight*, if you'll trust me and do what I ask."

"No," he said doggedly. "We can't. It would be to own myself beaten. No, it's not as bad as all that. Let me think. Stop chattering and let me think."

She released his hand, and he went over to the desk and sat there staring at his papers.

"Oh, no, old girl, you've gone off at a tangent. There are more ways of killing a dog—I've till to-morrow morning. Funny thing if I can't manage to see daylight without turning pale. Don't say anything more. I want to think." Then, after a silence, he spoke with a change of tone, more briskly, more in his usual style. "Look here. You hit the right nail on the head when you said we should have to make sacrifices. Well, I've figured it out. A pill to swallow, but it won't choke us. Five or six thousand judiciously laid out will see me through the wood."

Then he told her that he must get off a large number of letters, so that they would reach their destinations by the morning's post, and nullify the damaging effect of that May and December announcement. When people fancy you have lost all your money, the trick is to show

them that you still have money. It is not necessary to show them a lot of money. A few sovereigns on top of a sack of brickbats will often look like treasure. He would settle several urgent claims in full, and would send checques on account to everybody else. He had calculated the amounts. Nappensols' mouth could be closed with fifteen hundred pounds; other mouths might be fed more sparingly. He would also tell everybody in conversation that the baronet's marriage made no difference to his ultimate circumstances.

"Perhaps that's literally true, Claire;" and for the first time he laughed, but rather ruefully. "I don't know that it does make any difference."

And he went on to say that the money required for his soothing operations must, of course, be provided by the sale of stock. "I *borrow* it, Claire, from our capital, but I reinstate it as soon as I can. We do the whole thing without outside assistance. Even if your mother wasn't pretending that I had milked her dry, I should leave her out of it. I don't want gossip."

He got up, stretched himself, and spoke firmly and confidently.

"Now, Claire, you talk enough of helping me. This is the time. Where's that typewriter of yours?"

"In the other room. You know I haven't used it since you——"

"Well, you've got to use it now, if you're to be any good to me. Fetch it."

His spirits had risen again, and when the butler came presently to answer the bell, he gave his orders with almost jovial easiness of manner. He wanted the usual tray of bottles and glasses, and the fire was to be made up. Then he took off his coat and threw it over the back of a chair.

When the man returned with the tray, his master was seated at the big desk in his shirt sleeves, while the mistress

sat at a small table near him, assiduously dusting the keys of her long discarded typewriter.

"Shove on plenty of coals," said Mr. Vaughan, over his shoulder. "Now don't let me be disturbed. You can all go to bed. . . . Ready, Claire?"

"One moment."

"Buck up. Be nippy. Don't fall asleep. . . . First letter is to the bank. By selling the stuff through the bank I lose my half commission, but I must let that go. You'll have to write a line to those fossils in Gray's Inn, Collies, to advise them of what you're doing, or we shall have them on the fidget. Now. Begin. 'Dear Sir, be good enough to sell for me securities as under.'"

He dictated, and she struggled desperately to type the words as quickly as he spoke them.

"Oh, God, how slow you are!" he said, during the second letter. And he came and stood looking down at her, making her slower and more blundering than before. "Look here, never mind the mistakes. Fire ahead and get it down anyhow. You can do fair copies afterwards, and I'll give you notes to type from presently."

Then the dictation went on again. She had exhausted herself utterly in that passionate appeal to him to renounce his empty splendours and begin life again on simpler, cleaner lines. It had seemed to her while she poured out her long-suppressed thoughts that a tremendous crisis had come, that fate was offering them an opportunity which, if they availed themselves of it, might allow them to wipe out all the wretched, sordid past. She had felt that her confidence in him would be revived, that even love for him would be evoked, if only she could persuade him to take the offered chance. But now she had ceased to think of these better things. She thought only of the task that lay before her. It appalled her as an almost fantastically impossible ordeal, the sort of overwhelm-

ing labour that we are set to perform in troubled dreams; but she meant to do it or die in the attempt.

That was a hysterical idea, she told herself, as with unpractised fingers stumbling on the treacherous keys, with hot eyes staring at them, she plodded on. Her head ached, her back ached, her heart beat tumultuously at every slip she made.

"Getting on all right?"

"Yes."

"Stick to it."

This was hours later. He had done dictating and gone back to his desk. After writing many cheques, he began to supply her with manuscript jottings which she was to convert into formal business-like letters. She was working exactly as people work in dreams now; but the work seemed easier, the atmosphere of the dream less heavy and distressing.

Suddenly Roddy gave a shout that brought her out of the dream with such a shock that she nearly fainted.

"*Stamps!* Have we enough stamps? If we can't stamp the letters I'm done."

Claire knocked off work to join in the stamp hunt, going upstairs to the brown and gold bedroom to look for stamps there. Enough stamps were found. Roddy gave a sigh of relief; Claire sat down to her work again; and the long hours of the night passed.

Roddy had done his part and was waiting for her to finish all the fair copies. He piled up the fire and made it blaze again. He walked about the room, drank and smoked.

"Have a little whisky and soda. It'll buck you up."

"No, thank you, Roddy."

"Biscuits?"

"No, I won't stop."

"Bravo! You've a rare pluck, Claire. I always told

you so, didn't I? We shall do it on our heads. It's only four o'clock."

She would not stop. She was like a soldier on a forced march; knowing that he must go on marching, that he must break blood-vessels in the brain sooner than cease moving, that he dare not fall out, though every six foot length of ditch by the roadside tempts him to roll into it and die comfortably.

Roddy had put on his coat long ago. Fetching an overcoat from somewhere, he wrapped it about him, lay upon a sofa, and slept. He woke refreshed.

"Nearly through, Claire?"

"Only a little longer, Roddy."

He had another drink, lit another cigar, and strolling about the room, talked quite gaily. His sanguine temperament had recovered its natural elasticity.

"The news was a smack in the face, I admit; but Roddy Vaughan, isn't to be bowled over as easily as all that. I was inclined at first to make a mountain out of a molehill. And I was wrong to let *you* take it so seriously, old girl. I wish you'd have a drop of whisky and soda."

Claire shook her head, but did not answer. The click-click-click never ceased. The bell tinkled at regular intervals.

"I'd like to justify myself in your eyes—I mean, about all my debts and engagements. Things you said to me to-night have touched me, Claire. I *will* take you more into my confidence. For the future I'll show you a detailed statement of my earnings. It would astonish you, the sums I often touch. No one can say I don't pull my weight in the boat. As to this paltry six thousand, I'll put it back ten times over in two years. I'm playing a big game, a winning game, too—in the long run, a certainty." And he snapped his fingers and laughed, quite joyously this time. "Rather a lark, all this, really! Life would be too flat if one didn't have ups and downs.

I like a bit of a fight. Don't you? The excitement of it. I think I flourish on excitement."

Certainly she did not seem to be flourishing on it, if one might judge by the dark circles round her eyes, the deadly pallor of her cheeks, the piteous contraction of her lips, and the rapidity with which she drew her breath; but Roddy observed nothing amiss. She could hardly see the keyboard; she could hardly believe what, in fact, was true, that she was accurately copying sentences from which all meaning had gone. Only will-power drove the mechanism of brain and body, and kept her seated at her nearly-finished task.

"I have done, Roddy."

Then Roddy got to work again, signing, folding, stamping. He felt pleased with the achievement; he whistled as he walked briskly along Sedgmoor Street to put all his reassuring letters in the pillar-box at the corner.

It was dawn. At what seemed a fabulous height, Claire could see the outline of windows on the second landing, grey and ghostly above the yellow glow of the electric light, as she crawled upstairs, dead-beat, holding to the balusters. When she reached her room she fell across the bed, groaning.

Thirty hours afterwards she gave birth, prematurely, to a girl child.

CHAPTER XV

DURING the day, the night, the morning of the next day, while anxiety filled the house, Roddy was truly terrific.

Everybody wished him a thousand miles away, he was so loud, so fervent, so overwhelming; but nothing would make him absent himself even for half an hour's fresh air and exercise. He felt like a general on a field of battle, the captain of a storm-tossed ship with the rocks on each side, or anyone else of whom duty imperatively required that he should remain where he was, in the thick of it. He issued orders, advice, even threats. If only one life could be saved, it must be the mother's. However, he wished the two lives to be saved, and saw no reason why they should not be, if the progress of modern science meant anything at all. If chloroform was indicated, it probably would be wise not to delay. Or any other anæsthetic, no matter what it cost. Money was no object. But if the famous specialist made a mess of the case, he would jolly well hear about it.

"She overtired herself yesterday evening, doctor. Could that have anything to do with it?"

Hour after hour one heard his voice as he talked on the telephone. He had cancelled all appointments, and he told everybody the reason, fully. Perhaps this seclusion suited his book in one way. Sometimes it is easier to answer troublesome questions on the telephone than if you are in the same room with the inquirer; you have only your voice to manage and don't have to bother about the expression of your face.

"That you, Vincent? Sorry I couldn't meet you as arranged; but my poor wife. . . . Yes, now. Taken

with her pains unexpectedly, two months or more before the time. . . . Oh, yes, I saw the news. No news to me, of course. We are all very pleased about it. Fact is, the old fellow wanted a companion, someone to look after him. Very lonely up there by himself in that huge barrack of a house. Yes, a charming girl. The wife and I would have been at the wedding, but for this upset. . . . Yes, I've secured the best obstetric surgeon in Europe. . . . Oh, no, doesn't made a bit of difference to me. Enough there to provide for half a dozen wives without cutting into my share. . . . Hullo, hullo! You got that cheque I sent you? That's all right. . . . Yes, I repeat, not the slightest difference to my expectations. . . . Oh, I'm praying that it may be over soon. The suspense is too awful."

So he went on, keeping the wires busy, calling for number after number; soothing the doubtful, craving sympathy from the kind. You could hear him right down in the basement, where the butler, listening, remarked dryly to other auditors: "You would think he was having the baby himself, wouldn't you?"

Yet beneath all this business activity and as the foundation of all the voluble, noisy statement of his cares and fears, there was true emotional anxiety. The thought struck cold upon him, making his hand shake as he replenished his glass of whisky and soda, taking all the snap and virtue out of the generously apportioned mixture: "Suppose I was to lose her, after all! My little Claire—my own dear girl. What on earth should I do without her?"

When not telephoning, or having meals, or drinking between meals, he walked about the hall and lower rooms rather in the style of his mother-in-law under stress of too rapid meditations. Great as he had known his love to be, he was surprised by the strength of it now. He asked himself if ever a man had so adored a wife, and then

magnanimously replied to the question by telling himself that she deserved adoration. She was such a tip-topper; a bit of allright, as he had once paid her the compliment of saying; a beautifully minted gold piece that would ring true on whatever substance one pitched it down. He wondered if he had really done enough for her; he reproached himself for occasional harshness; he promised himself to be extraordinarily gentle in his handling of her for ever more. She was such a delicate, sensitive organization that a hard word to her might be worse than a blow to another sort of woman. His tenderness was always increasing. He had the pretty but sincere notion that he would be willing to give half his fortune—her fortune—their fortune—what remained of it—if he could save her from grief or pain.

Then he clenched his teeth fiercely, as though biting at the hateful thought that for the moment he was powerless to assist her in the smallest degree. Unconscious of all his good intentions, she was lying upstairs in agony.

Although begged not to go upstairs himself, he could not keep away; and once, as he stood on the threshold of his dressing-room to listen, he heard her give a heart-rending cry. That scarcely recognizable voice of anguish coming to him from the other side of the closed door afflicted him with a physical discomfort so great that he almost staggered; and while his imagination recoiled from a vision of the familiar resting-place now changed into a darkened torture-chamber, he felt that he must burst in upon it, do something heroically definite to save her. One could not stand here supine, like a fatalistic oriental sultan outside the seraglio lattice, while janitors were doing to death one's innocent, faithful handmaiden. The nurse, however, appeared in the corridor and told him to go downstairs, and not to worry himself or her. He went down, wiping the perspiration from the back of his bull neck.

He used the telephone no more; he ordered Fisher to answer all calls, and he walked up and down the oak parlour, or sat with bowed head at the big desk, murmuring aloud: "My poor little, dear little Claire." By this morning, the morning of the second day, the annoyance caused by Sir Roderick's marriage had entirely vanished from his mind; everything had gone except Claire; nothing else, not the fish company, the glazed brick company, or the soon-to-be-floated rubber company, was of the least weight or substance in the further progress of life. The future had resolved itself to this: Was it to be Claire or no Claire?

Compared with the hard, stalwart, cursing Roddy of two days ago, he was limp, nerveless, a large, red-faced, unshaven jelly. When his sufferings were at last relieved and they told him that things had ended happily, his eyes filled with tears.

The tears fell upon his moustache presently when he stood by the bed and looked at her. She seemed quite bloodless; her pretty face was as if modelled in white wax; and her dark hair, not tumbling loose, but neatly braided, was like a crown upon her forehead. As he said afterwards, the sight of her finished him. When she spoke it was in a whisper, and the voice seemed to come from remote distances, from another world, from dark, mysterious spaces on the far side of the grave into which she had wandered and then been mercifully restored to him.

"A girl, Roddy."

"Yes, dear. Better luck next time."

And she whispered again, the words seeming to reach him without apparent movement of her lips, just as a flutter of her breath.

"Are you angry with me, Roddy, because it isn't a boy?"

"Angry, my darling? Why, how can you ask me such a question?"

But she had fainted. So he could not continue his protestations.

Weakness, nothing to fret about; of course she must be kept very quiet. He took a bath, shaved, put on a blue suit, went down to luncheon; and found that he had a prodigious appetite, after all that he had gone through. Never had a pint bottle of champagne been more grievously needed or more thoroughly enjoyed. With the hot, invigourating food and the cheering, stimulating wine, he tasted a fine ecstasy of satisfaction in the happy turn of events. He was like the captain who has stuck by his ship and boldly ridden out the storm.

After a cigar he telephoned the glad tidings to all the world; the family, business connections, and friends at the club.

By dinner-time he was a peacefully proud and contented parent. In the expansiveness of his joy he was greedy to talk, and there being nobody else available he talked to the butler.

"This is all very colossal, if you think of it, Fisher."

"I beg pardon, sir."

"I mean, Mrs. Vaughan presenting me with a daughter. It's a new generation, Fisher—marks an epoch in a husband's life. You're a married man, aren't you, Fisher?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Got any children?"

"Two, sir—boy and girl, sir."

"Ah. My word, Fisher, it's an awful business, childbirth. It never came home to me till now. Make's one feel one oughtn't to have let a fellow creature in for such a trial; regularly touches one on the raw, doesn't it? But of course, it's the decree of nature. Didn't you feel badly upset when Mrs. Fisher had to face it?"

"Very much indeed, sir. Extremely anxious."

"But I suppose the second time it was easier?"

"Oh, very much so, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, I couldn't really say, sir, except that I knew it wasn't the first time."

"Just so," said Roddy.

In the oak parlour, alone with his coffee, liqueur brandy, and cigar, he felt reconciled to nature's laws. It would be impious to set oneself in revolt against them; if they ordain suffering, then suffering is unavoidable. He was himself again, only a little bigger. As things dropped once more into their due proportions, he saw that all this anguish he had caused held its proper and legitimate place in the unfolding drama of his personal history. The resilient, steel-strong egoism that is the very mainspring of such natures as his enabled him now, while he stood lording it with his back to the fire, to feel a glory and an ease, as of success, achievement, triumphant culmination, even in the memory of that delicate helpmate, that docile slave, being torn to pieces to give him pleasure and perpetuate his race.

Roddy Vaughan was all right; not to be bowled over by slight scares about business, want of sleep, or acute anxiety. He felt an immense confidence—mingling with the warmth of the fire behind him, and the after-glow of the rich meal and strong drink inside him—that he would soon do wonders financially. He was eager to be back in the struggle for dubious adventures and illicit rewards. He would fight now like a giant refreshed. He meant to knock spots off the universe.

Meanwhile time was beginning to hang heavily. He thought of himself as slapping friends on the back, playing a game of snooker pool at the club, sitting in the stalls of a music-hall; and with this last thought he experienced almost an hallucination. It was as if he really heard the clash of a noisy band, smelt the lower strata of a cloud of tobacco smoke, and saw the movements of girls' legs in flesh-coloured stockings. He pulled himself together.

Not to be considered for a moment as possible. It would be distinctly bad form to go out on this very first evening.

He sat down and dozed. Then before the evening was over he sent for Pope.

"How's Mrs. Vaughan getting on?"

"Nicely now, sir, the nurse says."

"Come right in, Pope. And shut the door behind you," said Roddy, smiling at her. "Don't stand over there, as if you were afraid I wanted to eat you."

Pope looked rather nice in her black dress, with the little fold of soft collar round her neck; a well-built young woman, not quite as young as she used to be, but with plump cheeks, good eyes, and reddish brown hair. Her manner, however, was constrained and the expression of her face grave, severe; her lips compressed themselves hardly, instead of softening in a responsive smile.

"Well, Pope, wonderful events, eh? Here am I a bachelor again," and he laughed. "An enforced bachelor for the next few months, what!" And he observed her waist, her shoes, and her ankles—not very slender, Pope's ankles, but still ankles. "All on my lonesome; so I thought I'd like a little chat with you, Pope. Oh, hang it, I can't go on Poping you like this. Too absurd. And after such ages I don't know your christian name. I'll bet it's a pretty one. Well?"

"I was christened Emma, sir," said Pope, after a slight pause.

"Emma! Emmie for short. Well now, you jolly old, funny old Emmie, I've neglected you, I know I have. But life rushes on, and one never gets a minute. I hope you don't feel rusty about it."

"About what, sir?"

"Well, you know how grateful I was to you, and I promised you a handsome honorarium for valuable services rendered. And I haven't given it to you, have I? I dare say you've often wondered."

"I never once thought of it, sir," said Pope severely.

"Oh, my! How stiff and stand-offish we are! Don't frown, Emmie. It spoils your fascination;" and he laughed. "Emmie, you and I were fellow-conspirators in those days, eh? Real friends—and I want us to remain so."

As if in proof of his wish he had taken her by the arm with excessive friendliness.

"Let me go, please, sir."

"Rubbish. Don't edge away like that. What's the matter with you? Don't pretend you've turned against me, when we were such pals at first. You know you took to me from the very beginning."

"P'raps I was deceived by appearances. P'raps I wasn't the only one that was mistaken."

"*There's* a slap in the face!" said Roddy, with the utmost good humour. "You saucy little Emmie. But I don't mind. I like a girl with plenty of spirit. But I'll have a kiss to begin with, anyhow." He had clasped her waist now, and Pope, very rigid and determined, was fending him off. He wooed her softly although ardently, his face getting red and his eyes glowing; then, as Pope successfully struggled, his tone and phrase became alike wrathful. "Emmie, why shouldn't you take pity on my loneliness—show yourself a pal? Don't play the innocent. Damn it, you know your way about. Ah!"

By a combined push and wriggle Pope had released herself from his embrace; and she fled to the wall, and stood there more rigid than ever, both hands behind her back, and one of them fumbling for the button of the electric bell. Roddy, very red in the face and a little short of breath, stood glaring at her.

"I think you're out of your senses," he said mutteringly.

"No, sir, I think it's you who's forgot what's due to

me, and to somebody else in this house,"said Pope precisely.

Then Fisher, the butler, came in.

"What the hell do *you* want?" shouted Roddy.

"You rang, sir."

"I did nothing of the sort."

"It was *I* who rang, sir. I thought you said you needed some soda water," and Pope glided from the room.

The convalescence of Claire was slow, and she had a setback when Pope gave notice. She liked Pope; she and Pope had been together for so long; it seemed cruel and heartless of Pope to leave her at such a time. But Pope, although expressing deep regard for her mistress, was quite determined to go. She had made up her mind, and she could not change it.

What did Claire more good than anything else was the arrival on the scene of Aunt Agnes. Characteristically, Miss Graham appeared just in the place and just at the time that she was sorely wanted. She had been all round the world personally escorting two girl friends; she had done adventurous deeds, listened to reckless opinions in many lands; but she seated herself by Claire's bed with a quiet, reposeful air that suggested she would never move again. She soothed, she encouraged, she understood. She said things about the beauty of the baby that only she could have said—the very things that Claire had been longing to hear. And, what was so wonderful, this emancipated old maid knew incredibly more about babies and their management than Mrs. Gilmour, who had been the mother of six.

Eventually Aunt Agnes took Claire, the baby, and the nurse away with her to Bournemouth. Roddy made difficulties about this removal when told it was necessary for Claire's complete restoration to health; saying that he saw no reason why Claire should not get well where she

was, that it was rather hard on him to lose her company now that she could come downstairs, and after all the costs already incurred, rail fares, hotel bills, and so forth were rather a tall order.

"Oh, but all that," said Miss Graham gently, "will be *my* affair."

"Well, that's certainly very kind of you," said Roddy; "and I suppose I must waive my objections."

"Yes, I thought you would," said Aunt Agnes, with much sweetness of tone, and a glitter in her eye.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHY didn't you call her Claire?"

Emily Joyce and others asked this question. Claire said in reply that Roddy had wished to repeat the name, but she had thought it would be a pity. She did not tell them that she had a superstitious feeling that Claire was an unlucky name, and that properly she ought to have called her darling Hope, Joy, Comfort, or something that would symbolize the immensity of solace and bliss that had come into her own heart.

The name was truly of no moment. Claire had at last found the living thing that really loved her, that needed her always, that would never play her false.

"But if not Claire, why Gladys?" asked Emily. "Gladys has always struck me as such a particularly commonplace name. And we never had one in the family before."

Claire would not confess that Roddy had been unable to explain his sentimental fancy for the name of Gladys except by relating how it had once belonged to a mare who brought him luck at Hurst Park, literally romping home as a twenty-to-one chance.

Something of the glory and delight that motherhood had brought her shed a reflected radiance upon Roddy. Moreover, she was grateful to him for his display of solicitude at the time of trial; for the nurse had told her of his quite upsetting anxiety, and he himself again and again narrated the agonies that he had undergone.

Henceforth, then, Claire's universe revolved round the child's cot, and time was only measured by the child's growth. The sun shone when Gladys looked well and ate

her dinner with appetite; and all the town was dark and the sun seemed to have gone out like a candle on such days as Gladys looked pale, or nurse thought she had one of her bad headaches. It was a terrible year when the spring brought nettle-rash and the winter whooping cough. Gladys was undoubtedly delicate; but the delicacy would, of course, pass away with time.

Shadowlike and unreal when compared with these events of the nursery, the occurrences of outside life seemed to her now of little importance. Plainly affairs were not going well with Roddy. His new adventures did not prosper, his biggest coups were made only in talk. He was not treated any more seriously now than in the past by those large financiers whose favour he courted so assiduously. Often the taste of failure was in his mouth, and disappointment had an increasingly bad effect upon his temper. But Claire did not mind occasional violence now, and it seemed as if mere rudeness had lost the power of wounding her. He might swear as often as he liked, provided that his raised voice did not wake Gladys. She used to hurry upstairs to make sure that the child was sleeping comfortably, and come down again with soothing words and a gentle smile.

"Yes, it is hard luck, Roddy, and I quite understand how angry you feel about it. But you mustn't be downhearted."

Gladys was eighteen months old when once more the papers contained disastrous news of their titled relative. Lady Vaughan had provided an heir to the baronetcy. "A blossom on a grand old tree. . . . There is rejoicing throughout the West Riding. . . . Our readers will remember the romance of Sir Roderick's marriage;" and so on.

If Roddy spoke severely of the aged bridegroom, what he now said about the young wife and her infant son was far worse.

'Of course it's not his child. How the devil could it be? . . .'

Again his credit was assailed, and this time it was the crumbling and disintegration of his whole legend. Something like a collapse ensued. What Roddy himself admitted to be heavy sacrifices were necessary in order to get clear of embarrassment. They withdrew from their splendid Nappensol surroundings, which now at last were really paid for, and moved into a bandbox in Mayfair, "only a few doors from Park Lane," as the agents described it, where there was but space for a very small establishment.

Roddy had luck in selling the lease of the Sedgmoor Street house to a north country manufacturer, and he nearly sold all the furniture with it.

Sitting on a table in the hall, with his hat on the back of his head, he made sporting offers to this Mr. Davidson.

"There you are. Just as it stands. Chance of a lifetime."

"If I bo't it lock, stock, and barrel," said Mr. Davidson, "I'd save Mrs. D. a mighty lot o' trouble and myself a mighty lot o' time. An' I'm not saying that time isn't money."

"Of course it is. Don't I know that, by Jove?"

"But, all the same, ye're asking a precious high figure."

"Damned sight less than its cost," said Roddy jovially. He enjoyed this trafficking, and presently called Claire to his aid.

"The wife knows more about it than I do. She's an expert in furniture. Claire, what did you give for these Queen Anne chairs? Fifty pounds a piece, wasn't it? Show Mr. Davidson the marquetry and enamel on those Nappensol cabinets."

Claire helped him as well as she could; and if she had not known before, she must have seen now what a liar and a humbug he was when engaged in a business deal.

"I'll just have to think about it," said Mr. Davidson.

And in the end he thought he would take the house empty. Roddy was chagrined, and told Claire she had queered his pitch by humming and hawing about the price of the chairs.

The fashionable address of Mayfair consoled him for the reduction of establishment, and especially the closeness to Park Lane—the proper abode of financial magnates—pleased him. One day he would jump over the few doors that separated him from the place where he felt he ought to be. This was merely *pro tem.*

Here, in their new abode, they might with propriety have soon put on mourning clothes, for Sir Roderick did not live long enough to dandle the baby boy on his gouty knees; but Roddy refused to wear even so much as a band round his hat. He had exhausted all his maledictions, and he allowed the death and funeral to pass almost without comment. The legend was already buried.

Claire for a little while had thought that rudeness was bereft of its sting, but she found that he could make her suffer through the child. He wounded her cruelly when he spoke of Gladys making an infernal row on the stairs, or rang the bell for the nurse and abruptly ordered her darling out of the room. He made her tremble, too, when he talked of the child's education, the schools she ought to go to, the physical training and general hardening that she would probably require.

He was not unkind to the child, but so inconsiderate. He seemed proud of her in her rich and pretty frocks; and as soon as she had learnt to walk, he would take her sometimes for a stroll with him in Hyde Park.

It pleased him to see kind-hearted ladies admiring the little figure that toddled after him in the white satin bonnet and the white velvet pelisse. When she fell and lay sprawling and crying, he clasped her to his bosom; and then jumped her up and down in the air till all the breath

was out of her body, so that she couldn't go on crying. He acted the father on these occasions with a great affectation of unconsciousness, but feeling all the time sure that people were saying: "There goes Mr. Vaughan, the husband of that pretty woman, with their little daughter." Or if by chance they were not aware who he really was, then: "What a distinguished-looking man, and what a beautifully dressed child!"

"When I go with daddy," Gladys told her mother, "he makes me tire myself. I don't love daddy any more."

But Claire told her she must always love daddy, because he was daddy.

Sometimes he would play boisterously with her indoors, and the child showed spirit and tenacity at the playful tasks he set her. He dodged her with a ball round and round the room, defying her to get the ball, completely exhausting her in the fruitless chase. And the mother suffered torments while she watched.

"Don't—don't be rough with her, Roddy. She's *such* a little thing."

"Yes," said Roddy good-naturedly, "but she's like you, a good plucked 'un. There, little lady, there's your ball. By Jove, how hot she's got. Bedtime, eh? Yes, pack her off, Claire. I want to write some letters."

Gladys was well on in her fourth year when England declared war against Germany. She had been ailing, and they were all at the seaside; but in spite of the difficulty of travelling Roddy at once took them back to London. Claire thought she understood the reason of his haste. He intended to go to the war. He was a soldier; he had always talked of the fascination of campaigning; naturally he would go.

But he merely went into the city and cursed the German Emperor. He vowed that the devil himself must have let loose this infernal Bedlam, because he had a personal

grudge against Roddy Vaughan. The closing of the North Sea was the death-knell of that moribund fish company; all trade was at a standstill, and so no more glazed bricks would be wanted; and as to rubber, it would be allowed to rot on its tree. Did any one ever have such bad luck?

Those terrible first months dragged by. Everybody had gone now—even the single man-servant who had replaced Fisher and his footman. Their friend Colonel Pirbright had gone in state as a general; Cyril had obtained a commission in the Guards; Granville Budleigh's address had changed to Salisbury Plain; dear old Uncle Derek, after volunteering and being refused for active service, had enrolled himself as a special constable, and elderly Mr. Drysdale was driving an ambulance car. Even Leonard Joyce had been keen to go, until Emily put her foot down.

Yet still Roddy was dining at crowded restaurants, attending music-halls, where there was standing-room only, supping at the club, and being fined for playing cards after prohibited hours. With nothing happening in the City he had leisure, and he spent some of it in visiting Granville Budleigh at the camp near Salisbury. Mrs. Budleigh had been down there, staying at an hotel, and Roddy brought back a dreadful report of the squabbles of these two, of the lady's carrying-on with subalterns and of Granville's furious jealousy.

Then at last, in the spring, he announced that he was going.

"Claire," he said solemnly, "you mustn't try to prevent me. I feel I've got to do it."

Wanting to help the great cause in the most effective way possible, he proposed to enter the Ordnance department. He wished to use his brains; any ass could get killed.

"Besides, I'm not as young as I used to be. Do you

ever realize, Claire, that I'm over forty? I dare say I don't look it; but there it is—*Anno Domini*—and you can't get away from it."

Knowing him as well as she did by now, she was able to comprehend both his delay and his present attitude. It was not that he feared death. He was brave enough, but he could not act quite as a gentleman should. He was always slow to see things as gentlemen see them at once.

"Everything is done by influence," he told her, when explaining how she was to help him to secure the sort of job that he required. She did all that he directed; going on a wild-goose chase to crave assistance from friends at the War Office, wives of Members of Parliament, everybody judged by Roddy as capable of pulling a string.

Time passed, and then Roddy received an official intimation that he had been posted as second lieutenant to a reserve cavalry regiment. He was more than taken aback by this intelligence, and he expressed himself gloomily. The authorities had muddled his case, as they muddled everything. They would lose the war.

However, he soon put a good face on it, dressed himself in khaki, slapped his boots with a swagger cane, and went to Colchester for the very brief period of training allowed to such seasoned warriors. The time passed swiftly for Claire and Gladys, and then he was with them again, on a final five days' leave before proceeding to France. Strict economy was now to be the watchword, since every penny saved during his absence would be a penny gained for future use. With lightning rapidity he dismantled the Mayfair house, stored all the furniture, and bundled Claire, Gladys, and a maid into lodgings near the Edgware Road.

A marvellous improvement had been wrought in his air and aspect by the change to uniform. He was gay and debonair, a real professional soldier, with his South African ribbons decorating his manly breast. Claire's heart

warmed to him, and the dismissed maid-servants admired him prodigiously. He swaggered through these last days, combining the wind-up of business with a terrific final jollification, in all of which Claire had to share. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die. The dinners, theatres, supper parties, piled high upon the labours of packing and moving, almost killed her.

She went with him to the railway station to see him off, and there were kisses and tears at parting. Once again she was swept through and through by irrational emotion, and she felt and behaved as the other wives who clung and blubbered all along the platform. Something quite elemental ruled out thought; good or bad, he was her man.

Roddy, too, was entirely governed by primitive instincts, hugging and kissing, patting her on the back, and telling her to be brave. He leaned out of the carriage window to squeeze her hand again, and his last words were conventional but excellent.

"Dearest girl, if anything happens to me, think kindly of me. Remember, I loved you."

He continued to wave his hand; the moving train carried him away in a mist of tears.

He was gone, and that night Claire slept like the dead.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was a wonderful respite. Not for six long years had she tasted such comfort and such ease. Alone with her little girl, mistress of herself, unchallenged in her actions, unfettered in her thoughts, she was perfectly, ceaselessly happy.

She loyally fought against repeated recognitions of the plain fact, although every day, in every hour of the day, she was sub-consciously aware of the fundamental cause of her contentment. It was due solely to his absence. This was what life might still be, running on in smooth and simple joy, if there were no Roddy to spoil it.

The humble lodgings by the Edgware Road were as splendid as any home that she would ever sigh for; the landlady took an affectionate interest in her well-being and was very kind to Gladys. The only care or trouble in Claire's existence was a defective hot-water system that made it difficult to get her daughter's evening bath at the right temperature and at the right time.

"It's been the same annoyance for fifteen years, if you'll believe me, ma'am," said the landlady; "and the same promises every time I pay the quarter's rent. 'The matter shall receive immediate attention,' and then nothing done. If you'd step down into the kitchen I'd show you where in my opinion the mischief begins. The range itself, ma'am! The iron at the back so thin that you could pierce it with a meat skewer, while the bubbling and squeaking of the water in those worn-out pipes is enough to scare one for fear of an explosion. As I tell them, it's no question of repairs. A brand-new set-out is wanted. But now with the war on people's hands, I suppose we must just grin and bear it."

Claire reproached herself for not remembering always the agony of the world, for being happy while others wept. But in spite of casualty lists and widows' weeds, London was a gay and merry place in this second summer of the war. The war itself was still being treated in the good-humoured English way, much as any bazaar or charity fête had been dealt with by kind and well-to-do folk in previous years. It was the biggest bazaar, of course, that had ever been organized, and in order to make it a real success everybody must help. One saw the evidence of helpfulness in all directions.

All through the winter large committees of influential ladies had been sending out comforts, such as neck scarves and cigarettes, to the original troops; and now the wives of officers of the new battalions were comforting fresh arrivals with weekly supplies of chicken galantine and potted tongue. All the windows of shops like Fortnum and Mason's, and sometimes the pavement outside the shops, were stacked with useful contrivances, knick-knacks, dainties, for our army overseas. Embarrassed by the richness of the choice, kind friends hesitated as to what to select; for the dear men in the trenches might not say, and no one at home had yet guessed, that the only true comforts one could send would be a few more machine guns and high-explosive shells.

No, it was all very difficult to understand, and one might be pardoned if one sometimes forgot to be sad. A contagion of hope permeated the sunlit air. Charming ladies busily shopping in Sloane Street were nearly all of them optimists, and smiled as they told each other that Germany would collapse before the summer was over.

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised. My husband said so from the first. They'll go on just as long as they can, and then utterly collapse."

"Now I oughtn't to tell you this; so please don't let it go any further. But Ethel Muir's brother is A.D.C.

to one of the big generals, and in a letter he said, 'Always be prepared now for the very best news.' Ethel is positive he meant Peace. Of course, in his position he'd see it coming earlier than others, and he wanted to relieve their minds, though he didn't dare say more. The military rules are so strict, even when you're on the staff."

"Exactly. Well, I'm off to Hague House—you know, Mrs. Gilmour's. I work there every Tuesday."

"What work?"

"We're sending them thick woollen socks."

"But, my *dear!* Surely they can't want thick socks in this warm weather?"

"No, I never thought of that. But I suppose Mrs. Gilmour and Emily Joyce know. Perhaps the socks are for next winter—if it lasts so long."

The fact was that Mrs. Gilmour, after entertaining four wounded officers somewhere out of sight on an upper floor, had seen that her true line of helpfulness lay in knitting. It was a quiet mechanical exercise, to which she had always been addicted because one could practise it without altogether stopping conversation. She therefore set to work, knitting herself and making others knit also.

She spoke of her achievements with just pride, as she sat enthroned as queen or guiding spirit of all the ladies assembled at a knitting party. "Seventy-eight thousand to the beginning of May! Only I omitted to enter in my little book whether pairs or single socks." And letting her needles repose themselves, she regarded the company meditatively. "Since May there has been no mistake. It is all pairs. . . . Ah, here is Claire. Come in, dear, and find a place. Your needles are in the same drawer. Glad to see you, Claire. Many hands make light work."

Claire enjoyed these quiet, restful hours spent with pleasant companions in the dear old morning-room. The windows stood open, with the lace curtains gently stirring

as the warm, bright air streamed in; a distant murmur of traffic developed now and then to a roar and rattle as cars or lorries passed the house; and a desultory chatter of the half-dozen friendly amiable women rose and fell above the faint click of the needles. Claire took little part in the conversation, but sat listening, dreaming, feeling absolutely at peace. Once or twice she brought Gladys with her, and the child sat close by her side, behaving most beautifully, watching her mother's hands with grave, attentive eyes, never seeming bored, and only when encouraged launching the isolated statements of solid fact that all children produce with facility. As for instance:

"My daddy is in France fighting the Germans."

"Is he, dear?" said one of the kind, encouraging visitors. "Very nice and proper of him. Aren't you very proud of him?"

"I live alone with my mummy not very far from the Marble Arch. Not too far for mummy and me to walk there."

"And you like walking with mummy, *I'm* sure."

"Once we lived in a grand big house like Granny's house. Then we lived in not so big a house. And now we live in a quite, *quite* small little house."

All these remarks appeared to Claire marvellously full of wisdom and talent, and when Gladys was praised for being so bright and clever, she thrilled and blushed with happiness. It was so sweet to see her darling's success, and to know that she was appreciated at her proper value.

There was always a schoolroom tea for the afternoon knitting party. Belton, now the sole man-servant, threw open the doors, solemnly announced that the repast was ready, and Mrs. Gilmour, rendered brisk and sprightly by Belton's good news, led them almost at a canter to the dining-room. Presiding at the top of the table she looked at little Gladys perched high upon cushions, and held her head on one side while she studied family resemblances.

"She reminds me of you, Claire, and yet there is more of Angela in her general aspect. She has poor Angela's frailness, I fear."

"Oh, no, Mother, she's *very* well now, growing stronger every day."

"I hope so, indeed. You were too young to remember Angela's red cloak, I suppose? When the winter comes round, do get her a little Red Riding-Hood cloak. They *are* so bright and cheerful, especially if there happens to be snow on the ground."

Mrs. Gilmour presided over the tea-pots, but nearly all the pouring out of tea was done by Belton and Emily Joyce. Emily, as a rule, arrived just in time for tea, generally rather warm, looking like a large overblown peony; and she nearly always was further bursting with fantastic incredible tidings. She herself called these tales "scares."

"This is the latest scare brought home by Leonard. I give it to you for what it's worth. You know that Leonard is helping the Government as legal adviser to one of the recruiting committees? Yes. Well, the last scare is——"

Once she brought them a report that the Guards had mutinied and refused to go into battle. It seemed that they loathed the khaki uniforms and resented being made to wear them. They wanted to be given back their red tunics and their bear-skins, the things they had worn when they charged at Waterloo and everywhere else; and they swore they would not charge again in any other costume.

"I don't know that I blame them," and Emily laughed. "Of course it's a breach of discipline, but it shows their spirit."

Mrs. Gilmour, however, suddenly took umbrage at this scare. The Guards would never commit a breach of discipline. Since Cyril had joined the Guards she would not hear one word against them.

"And you do not think, Emily, how damaging, how really *wrong* it is to spread such canards. You just blurt it out without considering how it would put heart into the enemy if they believed the Guards could ever fail. You do not consider how we are surrounded by spies"—and Mrs. Gilmour looked severely at her guests—"any one of whom would be too ready to convey such intelligence."

"Dear Mrs. Gilmour," said one of the guests, smiling, "you surely don't suspect any of us of being spies?"

"Of course not. But one cannot be too careful," and Mrs. Gilmour turned a glassy stare upon Belton.

It was curious, but she seemed to suffer little uneasiness on Cyril's account, although she showed great maternal pride in his so far successful career as a soldier. Perhaps she felt that in some respects he was safer out there than over here, and that on the whole Germans were less dangerous than actresses. "The war," she said significantly, "has removed him from undesirable influences. It has given him another point of view, and has steadied him. All the dear boy ever needed was *steadying*."

She carried his letters about with her in her pocket—or rather she intended so to carry them, but generally mislaid them. When they were found and restored to her, she would seize the opportunity of reading them aloud; and Claire, listening to one of these recitals, was astounded by Cyril's new tone and manner. There could be no doubt that his mental attitude was greatly changed. He wrote with almost pompous sobriety, speaking only of lofty things; seeming to have become very religious, and asking that certain pious volumes together with a few modern poems might be despatched to him forthwith.

Round the corner in Hans Place Aunt Agnes mocked at her sister's knitting, at Cyril's conversion, and at many other developments of the day.

"We are so stupid, Claire," she said sweetly—"as a

nation, I mean. So incurably stupid, that I wonder if any lesson, however terrible, would be sufficient to knock a little common sense into us. *You* don't expect the war to end quickly, do you, Claire? How can it end quickly unless the Germans beat us? And I'm not sure that it wouldn't be the best thing to happen to us."

"Oh, Aunt Agnes! How can you—even in joke?"

"I'm not joking," said Miss Graham very gently. "It's what we deserve. . . . How do you get on with your nursing, dear?"

"Quite all right, Aunt Agnes. But they don't seem to want me a great deal as yet."

"They *will* want you, dear. They'll want everybody before they have done."

Miss Graham was giving bed and board to relays of nice girls while they underwent training as nurses. She had sent Claire to do a preliminary course with two of the girls, and had introduced her to Lady Pevensea's grand house in Arlington Street, now turned into a Red Cross hospital. Claire used to go there as often as employment could be found for her, and was well content to perform the humble tasks of housemaid or charwoman until such days as she might be required for higher duties. With all her time her own, she had enough for much beyond the care of Gladys.

Not the least of the pleasures given by her unwonted freedom was the renewal of easy intercourse with Aunt Agnes. It seemed to her sometimes, when she had run in upon her aunt as she used to do years ago, and they sat talking together in the room with the latticed bookcases, that but for the ever-present sense of motherhood she would feel as young now as then. Miss Graham never reminded her of intervening cares or worries by the slightest allusion to her husband. Not once did she make any polite inquiries concerning the absent warrior, and when after some time Claire noticed this very marked remiss-

ness and purposely spoke of him, Miss Graham got rid of the subject with the fewest possible words.

"Oh, you think he is somewhere by the coast? Etaples? Very likely. But what were we talking about just now?"

Did Aunt Agnes suspect that Claire was getting on very comfortably without her Roddy? Had she long since guessed at hidden distress? From Claire's lips there had fallen no whispered hint of any cause for complaint; no failure of loyalty had ever betrayed her into helping Aunt Agnes to understand the situation. But Aunt Agnes knew; and Claire was painfully sure that she knew after a characteristic little generalizing speech that she made when they were alone one September evening.

She had praised Claire's good looks, saying it was a joy to see her with a little colour in her cheeks, a more healthy and robust appearance altogether. "What magic medicine have you been taking, dear?" she asked, smiling archly and yet tenderly.

Then she burst out, in her usual quiet tone but with strong feeling. "What brutes and beasts men are, nearly all of them. And what humbugs we are, every one of us, to shirk the truth and not say it boldly. Humbug—it comes into everything English: our politics, our literature, our homes, our churches, even our obituary advertisements. "Dearly beloved husband!" "Deeply mourned!" "Never to be forgotten!" I met that Mrs. Kennedy this morning making a long mouth and telling me her agony of mind because her husband has gone to the front—and as pleased as Punch, really and truly. I hadn't patience to answer her. Of course she hates him, and with good cause, too, probably.

"Why should we pretend? It's too hollow. As I go about I rejoice in the sight of the happy, happy wives. For one who is sorry, nine are glad. Look at the women you see in the streets. Look at their radiant, smiling faces. The tyrants are gone. And the young girls, too,

they are quickly emancipating themselves. The stupid fathers are no longer here curbing and stifling them. This war, Claire, is the woman's chance, and, whatever they say, they are going to take it. They are breaking the bonds, and I pray that they'll never go back to prison."

Whether Aunt Agnes might prove right or wrong in this general forecast, there was certainly among Claire's acquaintance a young woman who, although her husband had not crossed the water, appeared to be fast breaking her bonds, and also to be determined not to go back to prison. This was Mrs. Granville Budleigh, whom Claire met again at Lady Pevensea's hospital. She was in the highest possible spirits, looking very handsome in the nurse's costume, with her copper-brown hair glowing brilliantly and her blue eyes and red lips taking vivid colour beneath the becoming white head-dress. Obviously she occupied herself more in lively flirtations with the wounded heroes or their medical advisers, than in the dull routine of actual nursing, and Lady Pevensea's matrons were not too well pleased with her. Cognizant of this fact herself, she told Claire that she did not propose to wait till she got the sack, but intended to push out to France, where she would obtain heaps more fun and excitement.

"I get on better with men," she explained gaily, "except with one of them. But then Jack isn't really a man. He's a subtle combination of an old woman, a wild elephant, and a dissenting parson. Simply impossible! Look here! I'll show you a letter I had from him a week ago. No, I want you to read it. Please, to oblige me. You know his people, you'll probably hear them talking about us again. You ought to know what he is."

And against her inclination, Claire was compelled to read the letter.

Granville Budleigh, permanently engaged on Home Service, wrote from Colchester. He began by saying that he was prepared to condone and pardon the entire past on

certain conditions; but before entering further into the conditions, he demanded categorical answers to the following questions. Then the questions followed, a long string of them. (1) Would she frankly own that she was wrong? (2) Would she with equal candour admit that he was right? (3) Would she undertake to discontinue her habit of interruption, contradiction, and impertinent comment when he was talking to other people? (4) Would she at once cease all communication of every sort and kind with Lieutenant D. B., cutting that gentleman dead if she happened to meet him in a public place? And so on, right into double numbers.

Claire, handing the letter back without any criticism, asked Mrs. Budleigh what reply she had made to it.

"I told him to go to the devil," said Mrs. Budleigh firmly. "Just that, my dear, and nothing more."

"But how will he take such a defiance? Aren't you afraid of driving him to—well, to extreme measures?"

"Oh, Master Jack knows there isn't any chance to be got out of it. If he doesn't return to his senses, he'll have only himself to thank. I told him from the beginning that if he played the fool I should chuck him."

And again came the puzzling, enigmatic smile that Claire had noticed before with wonder. It seemed to imply absolute confidence and strength, as if in some inexplicable mysterious manner Mrs. Budleigh felt herself to be above all ordinary laws and customs, self-governing, unassailable.

CHAPTER XVIII

THIS year the long bright summer seemed to continue indefinitely. November opened and the sun still shone, and still Claire was happy and at peace. She and Gladys walked in the park with orange-tinted leaves dancing round them, came hand in hand along the now wind-swept pavement of the Edgware Road, turned into the quiet shelter of their by-street, and saw the shabby little house that they both loved because it was their perfect undisturbed home. They were both well. This north side of the park was so healthy that the child had not suffered by missing the usual holiday in sea air. The landlady was more and more kind and affectionate. Even the defective water pipes did not really matter.

Then in an hour their peace and comfort vanished. Without preliminary warning Roddy had come home on leave.

It was late in the afternoon when he arrived. He wanted at once a hot bath, a blazing hot bath, and his bellowing protests, on failing to obtain it, changed Mrs. Morris, the landlady, from an affectionate friend into the very indignant proprietress of a slandered lodging-house. He wanted his buttons and buckles polished, so that they would shine like fire at dinner, and he made Claire's maid shed tears by his comments on her feeble efforts to achieve the desired end. He wanted the little bed that Gladys occupied in her mother's room to be carted out of the way immediately; and when the child clung to Claire's skirts and entreated not to be banished, he frightened her out of her wits by vowing that if she did not behave herself he would take her to France and drop her into the first trench he saw there.

"Pack her off, old girl. Stop squalling, you little ass. Let her sleep with What's-her-Name. This is daddy's and mummy's room now. Daddy and mummy want to be all alone together."

In the midst of the turmoil and confusion that he had so suddenly created, he was quite unconscious of disturbing anybody otherwise than pleasurably. He was really bubbling over with gladness and good-humour. He never stopped talking, as he followed Claire about while she superintended the catastrophic changes of domestic arrangement that had become necessary.

"Don't you fuss, old girl. Give your orders, and tell 'em they've jolly well got to carry them out. Put on your very best togs, and off we go. You shall have the best dinner in London to-night, or my name's not Captain Vaughan. Were you proud when you heard they'd made me a captain? Oh, by Jove, Claire, this is all right, and no mistake," and he clasped her in his arms again.

His embraces were so violently amorous that, after almost suffocating her, he left her face smarting as if it had been stung all over with nettles.

"Truly glad to see me? But why do I ask?" he said fondly. "There was no time to tell you I was coming. Only got my leave yesterday morning. I might have wired from Folkestone, but then I thought I'd let you have the jolly surprise. Now come on. Be nippy and change your things. Never mind the kid. She can say her prayers without you for once. These seven days belong to poor old Roddy. Claire, you've been a brick, the way you've carried on and kept the home fires burning. Living so gloriously cheap, too, and saving up all our money! Well, we'll blow a bit of it now. I mean to give you a royal time in these seven days."

That first night he took her to his beloved hotel in Piccadilly. There was a little unpleasantness on arrival when Roddy told the taxi-cab driver that he was an extortionate

scoundrel, and that if he had him in France he would give him Field Punishment No. 1. Then soon they were seated opposite to each other as in those old days. The big room was as crowded as ever, a band of some kind was making noisy music, and the same head waiter or manager came smiling to their table. Roddy greeted him with boisterous delight.

"Carlos, you old bounder, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you, sair. And I hope I see you in good health, and madame," said Mr. Carlos, bowing.

"Upon my word, Carlos, you are a sight for sore eyes," and Roddy laughed and rubbed his hands together. "Lying out there in the mud and the rain, with the shells banging and bursting, I've often thought of you."

"That is a vairy kind compliment, sair, and I appr-r-r-e-ciate it."

"Then show your apr-r-r-eciation," said Roddy, imitating him merrily, "by providing me and my missus with your tip-toppest thing in dinners, and the best champagne on your list."

Indeed, if he could have eaten two dinners at the same time he would gladly have done so. If he could have smoked, too, as well as talking with his mouth full, he would have been still more content. He was greedy to attain all possible pleasures at once. He had come home to enjoy himself, and his only fear was that he would not squeeze sufficient enjoyment into the narrow space of time at his disposal.

"Claire, does this animated scene take you back into the past? It does me. Oh, if you only knew what it means after roughing it out there? Claire, lean forward so that I can whisper. I know you hate letting other folk into our sentimental confidences. Well, I feel towards you just exactly as I did on our honeymoon," and his voice vibrated with emotion. "We'll make it a honeymoon, eh?"

Claire looked at the table-cloth. She dared not meet his eyes, lest he should read the apprehension and repugnance in her own.

"You haven't said a word about my appearance. Don't I look *fit*, Claire, and *young* too? Look at me, old lady. Aren't I quite the juvenile Roddy again—the one that took your fancy when you first saw him?"

She looked at him now. His words had strangely fallen into the workings of her actual thought. Physically he was without doubt improved. He was well-trimmed and neat, like a plant that, after beginning to run to seed, had been severely pruned by stern gardeners. The regular life of a soldier, discipline, comparative abstinence and temperance, had all done him good. He was stronger and more healthy.

But the man himself? Was it possible that he had always been like this? It was not merely his loudness, or the almost bullying non-commissioned officer swagger, or the wolflike hunger for food; it was the overwhelming vulgarity of mind, the incredible coarseness of feeling. He seemed to her fantastic, like a man on the stage *acting* vulgarity, or like somebody carrying through a carefully planned and rather heartless practical joke in order to frighten a hypersensitive relative—the man who comes home after a long absence and puts on a grotesque disguise before entering the family circle. Would he suddenly laugh and say: "It's all right, Claire. Only my fun. I'm not really as bad as this?"

"Claire, you aren't doing justice to the wine. Come on. No heel-taps. Here's to Victory and a Glorious Peace! It can't come too soon for Captain R. V." And he boasted of his regiment and those tip-toppers, his brother officers. "You may think cavalry has taken a back seat in this war. But you give us half a chance and you see how we'll roll up the line. Though, between you and me, Claire, I only regard my present job as *pro*

tem. I ought to be on the Staff, and mean to get there. And if not that, there are plenty of other snug billets where you can be smothered in decorations without even smelling powder. I'll dodge the bullets if I can, for your sake, my poppet."

During the whole of his leave he only spoke in a lofty or correct manner on one subject. That was when he talked with contempt of profiteering. After a visit to the city he said he was disgusted with what he saw there. People were just as much "on the make" as they ever were. Their patriotism was gammon and spinach; they were cynically exploiting their country's misfortune to pile up ill-gotten gains. And it was the same thing in all the shops. Everywhere you were overcharged; everywhere you met hypocritical brutes who tried to "do you in" while praising you for gallantly facing death for them.

He denounced these bad citizens on every occasion, talking to waiters, hall porters, anybody, about this scandal of the hour. "Shirkers, slackers, from the word Go. Dodging out of doing their bit, and then bumping up prices and growing fat in smug security. Talk about the Germans! I regard these selfish sharks as a dashed sight worse."

True to his word, he made Claire take her full share of the royal time that he had promised. Luncheons, dinners, suppers, theatres, music-halls, even dance clubs—he let her off nothing. Except for brief jollifications with men friends, he kept her always with him.

"Oh, how the time flies! Would you believe it, Claire? Four days gone already."

She could believe. It seemed to her like four years.

He had promised great treats for his daughter, too; but, carried along in the whirling torrent of his own gaieties, he allowed Gladys to remain stationary on the shore until the leave was nearly ended.

On this his last day he said he would be occupied with

business; but when Claire came home before luncheon, she heard that he had returned to the house unexpectedly and taken Miss Gladys for a stroll. She went out again to look for them, then hurried back to the lodgings and waited for them there. Of course, he knew that it was now long past the child's dinner-time; he would bring her in at any moment, laughing and happy. It was absurd to feel anxious.

But the trouble was that Gladys had gone out insufficiently clad, with only her little cloth jacket instead of her thick-lined cloak, and a rather keen wind was blowing. She might easily catch cold on this sort of day.

They did not come back, not by two o'clock, not by three o'clock, and thence onwards Claire suffered a torment of anxiety. Terrible fears as to the cause and possible explanations of their absence alternately flashed in vivid pictures through her mind. At dusk she was pacing up and down outside the house. He would not, he could not, keep Gladys out now that the daylight was fading. But darkness fell, and still they did not return.

Then for some time she was possessed by a cold and rigid sort of panic. Something terrible and irrevocable had happened, and it only remained to learn the worst. She hurried out of the by-street, talked to policemen at the crossings in front of the Marble Arch, talked to the guardian at the park gates. Then she sprang into a cab, told the driver to take her to New Scotland Yard, and after going a short distance, leaned out of the window and asked to be taken back again.

Perhaps now she would find them safe at the lodgings.

They were not there. And she broke down in tears. The panic fear had gone, and an immense desolation filled her aching heart. Why had he done this unspeakably cruel thing, to take her fragile, delicate child out of her care? Why had he brutally exposed her precious darling to unknown, unmeasured risks?

It was seven o'clock when he brought her back. Claire at the door of the taxi-cab took her into her arms and carried her up the steps to the narrow gas-lit hall.

"We have had a rare jaunt, and she's thoroughly enjoyed herself," said Roddy, "but I am afraid she's a bit tired."

She was crying piteously, trembling and cold, all limp from fatigue. Her boots and stockings were wet and mud-stained; she had lost her gloves, and her little hands felt like ice against her mother's face.

Presently Roddy came to the upper room where Claire and the maid, both on their knees, were pulling off the wet stockings, rubbing her feet with towels; and between the puffs of a cigarette he told the tale of their adventures.

The idea had suddenly occurred to him to take her to the Zoological Gardens. He had fed her there, and they had studied the animals exhaustively. "She loved it, Claire. I carried her on my shoulder through the lion house, and after a preliminary squall she was as plucky as could be." Then, not being able to get a cab, they had gone by omnibus to Piccadilly.

"Outside the omnibus or inside?" asked Claire, with her head down, rubbing the child's legs.

"Outside."

"And how did she wet her feet?"

"Oh, that must have been going across the long grass in the Regent's Park, taking a short cut. We ran, didn't we, little lady?"

"And after that?"

After that, it seemed, he had taken her to a friend's flat, and then on to his club. He left her in the hall of the club in charge of the porter, and, yes, he had certainly left her there longer than he intended. Had he given her any more food since their meal in the Gardens? No, it had not occurred to him to provide afternoon tea, not having the afternoon tea habit himself. Moreover, he had fully in-

tended to bring her home much earlier, but pals had beguiled him at the club.

"Look here," he said, feeling distinctly fed up with Claire's curt questions, "it's time to think of dinner. You'd better change your dress, unless you purposely want to keep me waiting."

"Don't wait," said Claire in the same abrupt tone, and without looking at him. "I am not going with you."

"Not coming with me? Do you really mean that?" He felt incredulous, outraged, and then very angry, when Claire persisted in her determination to stay at home with Gladys.

"My last night in England? Well, by Jove, that's the limit! No, I'm hanged! That's too much!"

"I can't help it. I am afraid Gladys is going to be ill."

"Rubbish! The kid's all right. What are you fussing about?" And he went downstairs protesting to the universe against Claire's treatment of him. He had done more than could have been expected of ninety-nine fathers out of a hundred, he had wasted the whole of his last afternoon in England, he had sacrificed himself to please Claire, and this was his reward.

Very late at night he came up to the room again, but Claire refused to leave her child's bedside. Gladys was shivering and yet feverish, sleepless and light-headed, haunted by visions of monstrous beasts and reptiles.

Early in the morning he came for the last time, to inquire if Claire really and truly intended to let him go to the railway station without escort.

"I am sorry," said Claire in a hard voice. "But Gladys is in a high fever, and I am waiting for the doctor."

Next day Aunt Agnes received an agonized note from Claire telling her that Gladys had double pneumonia, and for three long weeks the child lay between life and death. Then very slowly she recovered. Towards the end of

December Miss Graham took her and her mother to Torquay, since Cannes or Mentone was out of the question.

The child got well again, and the doctors told Claire that, so far as the pneumonia was concerned, she need have no anxiety. The disease had left no after effects; the little girl's constitution and health prospects were just what they had been before the illness. Only they hinted darkly that these prospects had never been as hopeful as might be wished. There was something, vague as yet, that they did not quite like. The child's state, in their opinion, could not be described as normal; she herself was not exactly as other children of her age. They did not desire unduly to alarm Mrs. Vaughan, but they thought she should understand that the child would require care and attention. Climate would be of little consequence; she would do as well in London as anywhere else.

Claire took her back to Mrs. Morris's lodgings after Christmas, and this second winter of the war crept heavily towards the long-retarded spring.

Perhaps the illness had truly left no traces, but, nevertheless, Claire could not forgive her husband. She thought of him now as the enemy, the implacable foe to joy, no less dangerous to her child than to herself. In reply to his letters she wrote to him without a pretence of affection.

He regularly reported his doings. He had achieved his original ambition, and, having left the regiment, was now engaged on ordnance work. He had a good billet and a nice French woman who cooked for him beautifully, but still the war was not a picnic. Going up to inspect a dump not very far from the line, a German shell had hit the road just after he had passed, not two hundred yards behind his car. Claire, glancing at Gladys, brooding on the past and on the future, would not look into her own heart; perhaps afraid of seeing there the terrible thought that they two would be safer if the shell had burst when the car was passing instead of after it had gone by.

If such wicked thoughts could indeed force a secret lodgment in her gentle breast, it was soon swept clean and pure again. One day in March she received an official telegram telling her that Captain Roderick Vaughan was wounded. Imediately she had a great revulsion of feeling. While she had been selfishly brooding on her wrongs, he had been making the supreme payment. Perhaps even now he had given his life for his country.

But a visit to the War Office reassured her. He was only slightly wounded. Then after three days she had news in his own handwriting. The wound was very slight indeed—merely a shell splinter catching him on the fleshy part of the thigh. She need not be afraid: he was in hospital, well nursed, very comfortable.

A month later, on the first fine morning in April, when she and Gladys, carefully muffled, returned from a short walk, they found a cab standing outside the door. The cabman was lifting a huge Wolseley valise; the steps in front of the door were piled with a mountain of kit, from which rolled like small landslips such trifles as canvas buckets, folded chairs, despatch cases; and in the hall stood Roddy, bluff and loud, a highly-tinted picture of rude health. Next moment Claire was crushed against the rough cloth of his tunic and the hard edge of his chest strap, while her hat went backwards and her hair-net broke beneath the forceful ardour of his embrace.

"On sick leave?" she gasped.

"No, home for good. I'm clean out of it."

"What? Invalided out?"

"No, they have let me go altogether. They all agreed I have fairly done my bit. Claire, I can tell you they were jolly, *jolly* nice about it—the big-wigs, the small fry, everybody."

CHAPTER XIX

AND now the real wretchedness of Claire's marriage began. All that had happened hitherto was but the prelude.

With a final compliment on her economy he resumed control of the purse, appointed her his housekeeper, and once more called her to account closely for the sums that he issued. He made difficulty about the slightest extra outlay, telling her that now she had learnt by experience how far a few pounds will go with proper management she ought to be able to produce the greatest possible effect at the least possible cost. He was so severe in ruling out extravagance as betrayed in her purchase of delicacies and comforts for Gladys that she at once began to sell superfluous garments and jewellery, making a hoard of the proceeds from which she could provide for the child's needs without having to face his criticism and displeasure. He was the master.

Their house was situated in one of those short streets that connect Great Portland Street and Regent Street, a tall and narrow old house with a nearly new terra cotta front, sandwiched between the wide splendours of a tea shop and the gaudy little window of a milliner's. Roddy rented it furnished, and as he said dirt cheap, from owners who were frightened by the last visit of Zeppelins and wildly anxious to retire into the depths of the country. Though it might seem impossible when you looked at the terra-cotta, yet the inside of the house was worse than the outside. It had sticky, embossed walls paper, velvet chairs and sofas, modern fireplaces like the openings of highly ornate railway tunnels, lamp-shades with immense card-board butterflies, chandeliers with tinted ribbons as

large as schoolgirls' sashes. In all the rooms there were reproductions of the most insipid mid-Victorian art, very richly framed, and with gilded lettering for the tell-tale titles—*Her first Dance; Telegram for you, Sir; The Charity that begins at Home*, and so on. But to Roddy it seemed more than all right. Never remarkable for nicety of æsthetic judgment, and now coming fresh from the horrors of war, he thought it perfect. He was so pleased that he did not even say it should be considered as *pro tem.*

Looking strangely out of place in these tawdry surroundings, Claire moved to and fro with the graceful dignity of a fallen princess, sad and white of face often, quiet and repressed in manner always; teaching their duties to the servants, those queer war servants that alone were available; or going upstairs just before a dinner-party to sit for a few minutes with Gladys, and then perhaps wiping her eyes outside on the landing before she pulled herself together and came down to receive her husband's guests—the riff-raff of both sexes with whom he loved to feast and make merry.

The time of dinner-parties had begun again, in spite of the fact that such festivities were considered unseasonable and improper by all right-minded people. He liked to see the happy faces of his pals around him, and he insisted on giving them and himself "everything of the best;" putting no limit to expenditure in this particular respect; making the champagne flow as profusely as when England was at peace; altogether refusing to listen to public admonitions against waste of substance. Hang it, such rules could not apply to one who had so nobly "done his bit." So he drove Claire to procure the fine unnecessary food, sent her to get chickens and game at a certain poulterer's where they "rooked you but asked no questions," told her to use intelligence and diplomacy with butchers and grocers—in a word, to "wangle it somehow."

"I look on you as my A.D.C. or Camp Commandant," he said facetiously; "and it's up to you to forage round and make me comfortable."

She obeyed him in everything, and he kept her busy. She had no leisure, and her visits to the knitting-parties and the hospital ceased altogether. Her task in life was Roddy. The little time she could steal from it was all too small for her watchful care of Gladys.

After his first transports of affection were exhausted, he consented to leave her at home of an evening while he went out and amused himself. Now that he was safe, quite free from danger, and sure of having her to himself for ever, he felt there was no necessity to trot her round to every little piece of fun. Looking forward through the years he knew that he would be able to command her kisses whenever he wanted them, and therefore he had no continual sense of hurry.

During those first weeks of delicious ease after his fatigues he was very gay indeed, swaggering about everywhere in uniform as a wounded hero, helping the A.P.M.'s branch by sharp reproof of every passing Tommy who omitted to salute him properly and sufficiently. Then one night at a music-hall when he became involved in a disturbance and had to give his name and address the A.P.M. people, rather ungratefully, conveyed a strong hint that if he was out of the army he need not any longer dress as though in it.

Although he was so fond of his uniform as the badge of courage or evidence of patriotism, Claire suspected at once and little by little reached certain knowledge that he had left the army in a very poor-spirited manner. Knowing that compassionate grounds for release—to use the technical term—could only be established in the case of a perfectly sound person by the presence of extreme money troubles, he had put forward the plea that he had a wife and young child totally dependent on him, and that unless

he were allowed to resume the interrupted business of supporting them ruin and starvation would ensue. A chance meeting in the street with the wife of General Pirbright gave Claire a clue to these details.

Lady Pirbright said that her husband, now advanced to the high position of a corps commander, had been so very pleased at being able to cut the knot of Claire's difficulties by getting Roddy sent home to her. Naturally, the Gilmours, being such very old friends, he was delighted to use all his influence on her behalf.

"And now tell me. I do hope that Captain Vaughan got back in time to extricate things. It is not as bad as he feared?"

In suitable terms Claire expressed her sense of the General's kindness.

It was when Roddy fetched out his pre-war wardrobe and appeared again in civilian clothes that Claire first noticed the outwards signs of a process of deterioration which henceforth slowly but surely continued. The old shine and glossiness that seemed to be imparted by the man to the garments rather than by the garments to the man had gone for ever. He was negligent and careless as to ties and collars, no longer a fond guardian of the braided coats, not distressed by a badly-folded pair of trousers or a mud-stained cloth boot top. He did not always shave before breakfast, was content to lounge through the morning in slippers, and shirked the labour of going to the hairdresser to get his moustache cut and trimmed into the stiff little brush of which he used to be so proud.

Perhaps he felt that the lengthened, and in comparison, straggling moustache was the absolute demonstration of his freedom from all irksome restraint. The reaction after submitting to a year's discipline made him keenly enjoy all breaches of decorum.

He was the large, coarse plant that stern gardeners

abandon, now resuming its loose unchecked growth and rapidly running to seed again; or, to an expert eye, observing him as he lolled on a sofa while cigar ash tumbled on the velvet at his elbow, he would have seemed the typical old-fashioned N.C.O. who has found himself ensconced in the exquisitely soft job of camp-fire dreamings, and who is never likely with willingness to do anything harder than eat, drink, and sleep for the remainder of his life.

Whatever his failings, he had been industrious and energetic in the past; but now he was indolent and lazy, postponing and dreading effort. Months passed and he was still merely hatching a plan of campaign and not even pretending to do any work. As if in justification of his idleness he spoke sometimes of shell-shock—shell-shock not diagnosed in his case, but probably there all the same: the mysterious nervous malady whose after-effects can explain anything.

He went on talking with extreme bitterness of the profiteers, but in his tone there was now perceptible a grudging admiration and a secret envy. All the world, he said, was inflamed with the spirit of money-making; the few who refused to take part in the scramble for golden prizes offered by the war would probably not be thanked or honoured for remaining out in the cold. The city was no good. It was too late to pick up anything by Government contracts. Those who had plunged their fingers into that enormous pie took jolly good care that no late-comers should have a taste of it. But if you could make anything and sell it, or buy anything and sell it again, you could not go wrong. The ascending profit on every sort of exchange or barter was the source one wanted to tap at this time of day. And the war would not last indefinitely: the golden opportunities must soon pass away.

"It's now or never, Claire."

Daily examination of the milliner's windows next door at last stung him into action. He used to entertain his

guests at the dinner-parties with stories of the iniquitous profits made by his neighbour. For a little straw hat with a mauve ribbon, of which the material cost at present prices would not be more than perhaps eighteen shillings, she had the temerity to ask twelve and fourteen guineas. "And she *gets* it, mark you. I watch the hats go out of the window. Highway robbery. As much as twenty pounds for anything with feathers. The wife will tell you I'm not exaggerating. Simply coining money!"

Thus came the inspiration for the first of his series of war ventures. He took empty premises in New Bond Street and started a furniture shop, stocking it with all the furniture that had lain in warehouse since the Sedgmoor Street collapse and the retirement from the Mayfair house. Claire pleaded that he would exclude their wedding presents from the stock, because it would be so painful if their donors chanced to see them there offered for sale; but he over-ruled the objection as vexatious. He had long since spent the savings amassed while he was away, and from time to time they had impinged on their capital; now he made her raise more money for preliminary outlay —the sprat that was going to catch the salmon.

She offered to help him in the shop; but as usual he made light of her capabilities.

"Thank you, my dear, I don't quite see what form your help would take. This is going to be real business, you know;" and he smiled at her as one smiles at a well-intentioned but notoriously incompetent person. "You might walk up and down pretending to be a customer, of course, but I think that would be rather *infra dig.*"

She said that he would be buying stock as well as selling it, and she believed that she might be able to give him valuable advice. She thought that she really did know quite a good deal about furniture.

"You often said so yourself, Roddy."

"Did I, Claire?" And he laughed. "In my time no

doubt I've said a good many pretty things to you that I didn't mean too seriously. No, my dear, I must get some regular woman of business to help me in this job."

It was strange, but his slighting tone and the wound to an innocent vanity had power to give pain in the midst of her deeper and more logically founded wretchedness.

When the shop was opened he did not even ask her to look at it; and she, smarting from the slight, carefully refrained from ever going near it. He did not even notice that she kept away. He said they were evidently in for a huge success; they had sold a Nappensol settee and a set of brass fire-irons within two hours of unlocking the door. And as the weeks passed he reported that things were going like wildfire.

Then after some time he said that he had been thinking over her offer of aid.

"And that reminds me, Claire. Your typewriter! I haven't been able to find it. You sent it to the warehouse with everything else, I suppose?"

Claire explained that the typewriter had not gone to the warehouse.

"Where is it? Here?"

"No, I have sold it."

"When did you do that?"

"Oh, only a little while ago."

"That seems a funny thing to do. You ought to have got a dashed good price for it, because typewriters are as scarce as diamonds. What did you do with the money?"

"I spent it."

"On what?"

"Oh, on different things that I wanted."

He was frowning, and he pulled his luxuriant moustache fretfully. Seeing that he was becoming angry, she added that the things she had bought with the money were all necessities and not frivolities. She dared not tell him that they were for her daughter.

"Oh, all right. It was your own machine, so I suppose I mustn't complain. But it's an infernal nuisance that you have parted with it just when it would have come in useful. I was going to tell you that you might come for an hour or two of a morning and do a little clerical work for us. Nothing difficult—just copying. Now, I shall have to see if we can manage to fix you up with a machine."

And again she felt the stab of her harmless self-respect. She was not allowed to have a word in any questions of taste; she was held to be incapable of understanding anything connected with management; but she was to go like the humblest servant of the shop and do mechanical labour in order to give increased leisure to her intellectual superiors. She revolted against this minor outrage, small as it was when compared with the larger griefs that made her misery.

"No, Roddy, I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

She repressed all outward sign of indignation, and answered meekly. "To begin with, I haven't the time."

"Oh, you can make time enough. Beyond just looking after things here, what have you got to do all day?"

"You forget that there is Gladys."

"No, by Jove, I don't. Its Gladys this and Gladys that—fussing and messing about! Look here, if Gladys is to be put forward as the excuse whenever you don't choose to do what I ask you, I shall pack her off to school and get her right out of my way."

"No, oh no, Roddy, you won't do that." For a few moments she had stood looking at him with terrified eyes, and she put her hands to her throat as if struggling for breath.

"It's what I will do, if I have any more nonsense."

He was surprised by the vast effect of his unpremeditated threat, and either from obstinate anger or because

brutally willing to use any weapon that offered, he went on repeating it.

"Oh, but no," she cried wildly and incoherently. "No, that would be—yes, that would be too much. Roddy, you can't ever separate a little child and its mother."

"She's more than old enough to go to school."

"No, that I'd never stand. I—I let you do anything else, don't I? But don't attempt to do that. A child is sacred."

"That's enough. You're getting hysterical."

"My Gladys. No, oh no. You won't dare. Roddy, I warn you, if you ever dared to take away my child——"

"She's my child, just as much as yours. Aren't I her father? If I judge it more convenient——"

It was another most ugly scene. In the end his voice alone sounded.

"Dry your eyes, and stop making a fuss. As to Gladys I say again, please to remember that I am her father—with a father's feelings, too; as fond of her as you are, very likely, only not wanting to spoil her as you do. And, more than that, Claire, I call upon you not to set Gladys against me. *I've* a right to her love as well as yourself. I'm not going to allow disunion, or let you train the child to look on me as an ogre or bogey. The other day when I met her on the landing she shrank away from me in a way that I didn't like at all. If I speak sharply to her it's for her own good, and it's your duty to make her understand it. That's another reason that would make me disposed to send her to school, if I found that her confidence in me was being sapped and her affection alienated. As to her health, and what the doctors tell you, and all that, she might be a good deal better off at a school than here."

She would die rather than submit to separation from her darling, and yet his threats terrified her. They left her shaken and weak. After all, would she be able to

resist such cruelty, however monstrous and unnatural? What are a mother's rights? Very little, if measured against a father's. She pressed her face against the child's serge frock to hide fresh tears, and trembled the while. He was the master, and he held them both in the hollow of his hand.

Until he left the house, often very late in the morning, she kept the child hidden as much as possible, hushed her instantly if she raised her voice, to prevent his being disturbed; and she trained and coaxed her to run to kiss him at every chance meeting, in order to soften his heart. "You mustn't be afraid of him, darling. He is really very kind and good. He loves his Gladys and would never hurt her."

He did not repeat his menace; nor did he speak again of Claire's rebellion in regard to the suggested shop-work. He seemed to have forgotten. But her dread remained with her, changing in form, torturing her. Suppose he were to play some diabolical trick, such as taking Gladys away during her own absence. She remembered her feelings on the day when he took her from Mrs. Morris's lodgings, and would come rushing back from her errands to make sure that Gladys was still safe in those upstairs rooms. It was all right. He had not spirited her out of the house. And Claire would sit down with her heart tumultuously beating. It had been a baseless, foolish fancy; she told herself that whatever attack he made would be open, violent, not secret or underhand. And then the nerve-racking dread took some other form.

She had feared him before this and trembled, too, at the sound of his voice; but now she often quailed at the mere sight of him. When he startled her by coming into the room unexpectedly she felt a deep-seated physical disturbance; a commotion of her very being, similar to the shock of horrified surprise experienced by a child or timid person suddenly brought face to face with the huge savage

animal only previously known in frightening tales. Sometimes when one of the maid-servants brought her a message saying that he was downstairs and wanted to speak to her, she almost fainted. If he merely had to tell her that he required more money for the shop, she felt a relief as great as though a crushing weight had been lifted from her shoulders so that she could stand up, or iron bands were loosening round her neck so that she could breathe again. Yes, yes, yes, of course, she quite understood. The shop was going magnificently, but high wages, high rent, high everything, had temporarily to be provided for. Exactly. With eager haste she signed whatever papers he dictated.

They were living on capital, and she was not blind to what these words imply; but in this respect she was careless, desperate, as to consequences.

The woman of business or manager that he had secured for the shop was a Mrs. Ord-Knox. Roddy had introduced her to his home circle as "the wife of a colonel," evidently considering this a full and sufficient description, and perhaps unconsciously implying that it would be indelicate to inquire what colonel, or in which theatre of war he might be looked for. Mrs. Knox for her part allowed one immediately to infer that an estrangement had supervened between her and her commanding officer. Possibly the colonel was one of those unfortunate people who cannot support an excessive use of scent, in which case one could understand that the estrangement was inevitable; for Mrs. Knox carried about with her an almost overwhelming perfume of heliotrope. It was, indeed, so very strong that the Vaughan's guileless parlourmaid sneezed on the threshold of the drawing-room after announcing her.

She had dined at the house several times before the foundation of the shop, and since going into business she attended Roddy's biggest and most important parties.

She was a rather tall woman of forty or more, with a thin aquiline nose, pale grey eyes, and a large loose smiling mouth that in moments of complete repose, and when she thought herself free from observation, contracted and lessened itself to the hard, thin lines indicative of a cold and calculating temperament. In fact, on such rare occasions, her whole face changed to a worn and battered hardness from the voluptuously fascinating mask by which Roddy and his pals were so evidently allured. For the evening toilette she employed a considerable amount of paint as well as powder, and dressed her brown curls in a floppy style, although binding them low across her brows with narrow bands of gold tinsel. She talked drawlingly, raising her well-marked eyebrows when she laughed; dropped the final g of such words as ripping, and generally aped the manner of the lady of quality as presented to the public in conventional plays and second-class novels. She had pretty little friendly gestures, as when laying her hand on the sleeve of a neighbour's coat or tapping his knee with the long pointed nails of her cigarette-stained fingers; and from the first Roddy had voted her to be a clinker, without the least side or nonsense. Claire disliked her neither more nor less than any other of their guests.

They were appalling, these guests of the winter of 1916-17—war friends of Roddy, other furniture dealers, shop customers, wives of mysteriously missing officers like Mrs. Knox, but younger; and their unmarried sisters, not unlike the girls who are all day shopping in the Burlington Arcade and who walk backwards and forwards for miles before they find what they are looking for; anybody dubious, common, improper, as it were, pulled in out of the street for a bit of fun by the large-hearted rollicking host. Claire, anxious perhaps to-night because Gladys had complained of a pain in her back and could not sleep, lived through the evening as one lives through a long

journey in a crowded third-class carriage, a visit to the slums, or an obscene play at a continental theatre.

The jokes and chaff grew broader, louder. When the meal was over they sat long at table. Roddy behind a cloud of tobacco smoke, flushed, blissful, still plying the wine, began to propose loyal toasts. Mrs. Knox's drawl was lost in the chorus of voices and only her perfume reached one. "Here's to Victory. Here's to Peace. . . . Here's to the brave lads who are going to see we get it. . . . Here's to the living, and here's to the dead. . . ." It was dreadful to think of the Great Cause, and then to think of this noisy, half-tipsy gang daring for a moment to link themselves with its altruism and glory.

Two such orgies were rendered a little less unbearable to Claire by the presence of someone of different mould, a friend of her youth.

Walking one day with Gladys towards the Regent's Park, she had met Evan Giles, the writer. He was carrying books to the London Library, and looking as tired and threadbare as the shabby old volumes themselves. He woke as if from a dream when Claire spoke to him, and his sadly-lined face lit up with pleasure when he recognized her. He stood talking, was sweet to Gladys, begged permission to visit them; and Claire, grateful for his kindness, touched by the wistful look in his eyes, by something forlorn and disconsolate in his whole aspect, said they were soon expecting friends to dinner and asked if he would be good enough to join the party. He accepted with alacrity, came once, and then again.

He was not shocked; he enjoyed himself. Claire noticed that he drank very freely, ate little, and though for the most part silent listened contentedly. He thanked her when going, said it had done him good, taken him out of himself.

And Claire thought that in his case, of course, *Tout*

comprendre, c'est tout pardonner; his own mind carried such a beautiful delicate world of fancy that no common people outside this world could ever make him uncomfortable.

"You must come again, Mr. Giles, very soon."

"It will be a great kindness if you let me. Good-night, dear Claire."

But Roddy would not treat him with respect; was only just civil enough to prevent an absent-minded, dreamy man from seeing his rudeness. And for the second time he put his foot down. Enormous as was the social descent from those days when Emily's large bosom had suffered twinges of envy because of the grand and smart folk entertained by her sister and brother-in-law, he still felt that the company assembled at his hospitable board was too good for Evan Giles.

"I tell you I won't have that shabby scarecrow here again."

"Do you really forbid me to ask one of my oldest friends?"

"Put it like that, if you please. Yes, I do forbid you."

At last Claire paid a visit to the shop. Necessity compelled her. A doctor had lately frightened her by attributing the back-aches of Gladys to some latent weakness of the spine, and he advised that the child should join a certain class for specially devised physical exercises. The class would start to-morrow and Mrs. Vaughan must decide at once. But Claire could not decide without Roddy. She had not sufficient money. He was not coming home to dinner, having announced that he would be working at the shop all through the evening and probably till late at night. They were stock-taking and making up accounts there.

If she spoke to him about it all on the telephone, he would almost certainly say No. Then what should she

do? Somehow or other, Gladys was going to that class; a wave of indignation passed hotly through the mother's brain as she thought of the question being even for a moment in doubt. How could one hesitate to give Gladys the earth itself and all that it contained, if the gift would make her stronger and happier? However cowardly she might be in things that related to herself, she would never be a coward where Gladys was concerned. She determined to go down to the shop at closing time, make him consent and sanction the outlay. After all, it would be less than the cost of a single dinner-party.

But on the way to Bond Street her courage nearly abandoned her. It was a wretched cold night, with fallen snow slowly melting and seeming to give off a mist that made the darkened streets still darker. The cold, the darkness, and the heavy sense of the world's tragedy, made London horrible at night in these endless war winters. People passed one as vaguely threatening forms, shapeless, sexless, and nearly always silent. A momentary beam of light from an opened door, the voice of an unseen speaker, the music of a piano coming from behind drawn window blinds, startled without cheering one. In Bond Street there were many more moving figures than she had met with further north; and one of these phantoms tried to keep pace with her, asking in an elderly, masculine voice, "Why tripping so fast, O fair unknown?" Another, bulking huge and barring the way, announced itself as a Scotch Canadian private, and merely wished to know, "Canst kindly show me the road to nearest hoot of Y.M.C.A.?" But she could not find her own way, much less direct others. For a little while Roddy's place of business evaded her altogether; and she tripped fast to and fro, peering through the darkness and thinking, "This was the street of my fate. Somewhere quite near, on the other side of the road, is the place where he lodged, the place to which I went of my own will to take

slavery in exchange for freedom, and seal the bargain with a kiss."

A kindly, harmless little phantom of an errand boy put her right at last, and found the shop door for her. A shut motor car was standing outside it.

It was past closing time. They had turned out most of the lights and were putting the shop to bed. Two young women stretched holland shrouds over choice pieces of furniture, a young man moved to and fro locking up show-cases, and from some dim recess at the back came a sound of voices and occasional laughter. Claire noticed that the place seemed very empty. A small, richly-enamelled writing-table confronted her like a reproachful ghost of the Nappensol magnificence and immediately vanished as the dust sheet went over it.

Then a rather pert girl in hat and jacket came forward and asked what she wanted.

Captain Vaughan, the girl said, was in the office, but he could not possibly see anyone. He and Mrs. Knox were just going out to dinner. The car was waiting for them.

"Oh, very well. I'll take a message to him, since you insist. What name is it?"

"I am Mrs. Vaughan."

The girl smiled very pertly, stared hard at Claire, and turned away still smiling. At the sound of her name both the young man and the two young women had looked round quickly and were regarding Claire with curious interest. Then, before the message could be delivered, Mrs. Knox and her escort came laughing gaily from the back shop.

Mrs. Knox looked very grand, with her golden circlets faintly gleaming, her curls flopping down to her eyes, and her thin hook nose touching the collar of her immense fur cloak. She started and stopped short at sight of Claire, but greeted her with drawling courtesy; while

Roddy, not seeing her so quickly, was visibly disconcerted.

"Hullo, Claire," he said, recovering from his embarrassment. "We're off to the Alhambra. A pal unexpectedly sent me seats, and I'm giving Mrs. Knox a bit of food somewhere before the show."

"But has Mrs. Vaughan dined?" drawled Mrs. Knox. "Oh, but yes—surely—won't Mrs. Vaughan come and feed with us? It's the Ritz, isn't it? No distance."

"You're very kind, but, no, thank you," said Claire. "Only if you will allow me to speak to my husband for a moment. I won't detain him."

"Why, surely, indeed, yes," drawled Mrs. Knox; and she passed on.

Claire in a low voice told Roddy why she had disturbed him, and he at once gave his consent to all that she asked.

"Yes, of course, certainly. Anything for the child's welfare," he said good-humouredly and loudly, as if not unwilling that his words should be overheard by Mrs. Knox, who stood waiting for him at the door. "Hang the expense. When did I ever deny her anything? Now if you really won't come on to the Ritz I must be off. I shall return here to finish my work after the show. So I may be very late, as I said." And he hurried away with the lady in the fur cloak.

This was Claire's first plain intimation of Roddy's unfaithfulness; and as she walked home through the cold and darkness she thought of it for a little while. To have met the solid fact in this sudden manner, like a blow in the face, with the whole shop watching, understanding, and grinning at her, should have been something quite insupportable to her pride as a wife; and, nevertheless, as she hurried on her heart was warmed by comparatively joyous thoughts. What really mattered was all right; her poor little girl would not be deprived of the gymnastic treatment. Gladys was to be given this new chance.

Had she not known till now that his manager was also his mistress? "Oh, but, yes, surely" she must have known; at least, could not be surprised. Unfortunately the arrangement did not seem to promise well for the success of the shop. It must be very expensive—that fur coat, the car! The scent was probably quite cheap. Then as the thought of Gladys mingled again with these musings she felt something approaching gratitude to Mrs. Knox. It had been the presence of Mrs. Knox just now that made everything so easy. If Mrs. Knox had not been there, all dressed in her best and ready for the evening treat, Roddy would not have felt constraint, possibly even faint contrition; and in that case he might have refused. Claire walked on swiftly and lightly through the snow and mud of unswept pavements, thinking no more of the joyous pair who were hobnobbing in the candle light at a little table of the dearly loved hotel. She thought with hope of the child whose arms would soon be round her neck. Nothing else mattered really. Gladys was to have her chance.

For a time now Claire enjoyed immunity from certain of her troubles. There was a cessation of the dinner-parties. Roddy apparently was kept busy at the shop on most nights. He returned in the small hours and slept on a camp bedstead in his dressing-room, continued to sleep on it all through the morning sometimes and came down to luncheon with eyes rather blood-shot and a hand that shook so that it once broke a glass when he was helping himself to whisky. In this tremulous, exhausted condition he used to mumble about shell shock—"Never quite the same afterwards. It finds you out. Touches the weak spots," and so on;—but in spite of the nervous debility he swore with such vigour at the servants that three parlour-maids gave notice within a month. He looked so big and ugly as he came into the dining-room that it was difficult to overcome the qualms of Gladys and make her

run forward to kiss him as he wished. But he was often away from home altogether. He sought sea air at the week-end, and some unknown friend of Claire once sent her a common little newspaper with a marked paragraph in its society news giving a list of the people who stayed last week at the Hôtel Métropole, Brighton. The list included the names of Captain and Mrs. "Roddy" Vaughan.

Then, in due course, the furniture shop went to smash. He came home sad and doleful, sighing as he told Claire that the luck had run against him cruelly and he almost wished that he was dead. The fact was that he had merely emptied the shop, obtaining good prices for all articles sold, but never replacing them with fresh stock. The money had all gone in fun and riot. With the aid of Mrs. Knox, one might say without exaggeration, he had simply devoured the shop. And his low spirits were due to the callous behaviour of Mrs. Knox. In presence of the disaster she had deserted him. Never again would he have the solace in toil that had been provided by the slow music of the languid voice, the touch of those wavy curls, the lulling and soothing fragrance of the heliotrope.

Claire understood why he was sad. Indeed he almost seemed ready to speak of the misfortune that had befallen him, and plainly sought consolation and sympathy. But she did not at once realize the consequences to herself of Mrs. Knox's unkindness. She shivered as her ear caught the ancient and disused words of endearment—"Dear old Claire! Always a dear, aren't you? By Jove, when a man's down on his luck and feels all the world's against him, it's something to have one faithful heart to turn to. Bring your chair round, and sit by me, Claire. I'm afraid I've neglected you of late; but you mustn't think I've ceased to value you, yes, and to admire you, and think pretty things about you. You're my own old Claire, aren't you?"

And the pitiful struggle ensued—the miserable struggle

made by thousands of wives in Claire's situation, the hopeless effort to save a little self-respect from the wreck of all else. They are willing to forgive, to forget, but not immediately to condone. Flesh and blood, body and brain, every smallest thread of tissue, each tiniest nerve-cell, make them recoil in disgust. There is scarcely a task so vile that they would not without flinching face it, rather than subside into the still warm place vacated by the woman who has wronged them, and tamely suffer the caresses of which she has unexpectedly grown tired. Claire made the struggle—and was beaten. He was her master still, with all a master's rights.

But to her fear was now added a violent physical repulsion. By no effort of imagination would she ever again recover the old mental picture in which she saw redeeming features or qualities. The sight of his sensual lips, his fattening jowl, his great shoulders and bull neck, stirred her to the depths with disgust. When he forced his face close to hers she shut her eyes, felt faint, felt sick. Even when he put his arm round her waist or patted her on the back as they passed from one room to another, she sometimes nearly shrieked aloud.

He became a wine merchant, and just as he had eaten all the furniture he drank all the wine. He was habitually drinking in excess, and had not needed the temptation of trade facilities. After that he was associated with partners in some coal selling. When the coal burnt itself out he took to leather goods.

Then there came another crash in his affairs. It was the usual thing—another proposal to realize securities and pull him straight.

"But you are ruining us utterly," said Claire. "Soon we shall have nothing left."

She tried to argue with him, but he only replied that a couple of thousand pounds were so vitally necessary that he could not do without them.

Then with breathless eagerness she made a proposal on her side. She said she consented to raise the money if he agreed to their living apart. He was staggered by this abnormal suggestion, and said she must have taken leave of her senses.

"Are you mad? My word, that's a nice thing to say. You and I part?" He spluttered with indignation. "Do you really mean you would entertain such an idea?"

She meant it with all her soul; and with all her strength she pleaded that the idea might be converted into solid fact. There need be no scandal, no recriminations. People need never know that they had made the agreement. Courts of law need not be approached or have anything to do with it. They would get a deed drawn up binding each other. It would be quite easy.

"Where have you got all this from? How do you know such a dashed lot about it?"

"Roddy, I have found out, because I have been thinking so much about it. Lots of people do it. It's always being done. Not what they call a judicial separation—but just a deed—an agreement that we enter into and can't break."

He was angry. He would never, never consent. He clung to the notion that enemies to him had been poisoning her mind, priming her for mischief. If not, he asked, how could she have thought of it?

"Because I'm so unhappy; and, Roddy, I—I feel I can't go on."

But she had to go on. His was the sovereign will; he forced her still to bow to it. The money he required was supplied to him, and he gave nothing in exchange.

No member of the real business world could meet him without at once seeing that he was a man fast going down hill. He failed to keep appointments, forgot unposted letters in his pocket, became almost too indolent even to

talk of *doing* work. He let chances of gain slip by him, and knew that they were gone without remorse. He did not care to think of his big hopes and wide ambitions; he laughed away his sense of disappointment and failure, drowned all his sorrows in drink. Yet he never quite lost belief in himself and his star. At the core of him there was still a glow, a hope, or an instinctive faith in the indestructibility, the everlasting glory of that central phenomenon of the universe known to men as Roddy Vaughan.

Something would happen—and he knew it must be something prodigiously stimulating—to rouse him again to action and success. He was under an eclipse; but, after all, this semi-darkness was only *pro tem.*

And the strongest of all his appetites remained just as powerful as when he had been at his very best. In his widespread love-makings he was again the hardy adventurous hunter of the far-off past. Nothing feminine came amiss. After the thinness and high-bred languors of Mrs. Knox, he found the plumpness and loud slang of a music-hall artist a refreshing change. In this topsy-turvy London of the war, variety was never lacking, the game on foot never scarce. Dark girls, fair girls; chestnut locks and apple cheeks beneath white hoods; pale faces and tired eyes shaded by service caps; girls whose essential charm burst the disguise of their soldier's stiff uniforms or nurse's ugly gowns, and exploded with an emotional shock that thrilled him through and through—there was always something strange and new to run after. A girl in khaki trousers off a motor car evoked a passion that three long weeks scarcely cooled.

But he always came back to Claire in the end. Something he found with her that was nowhere else in all the vast town. In each renewal of that particular love-making he felt again, if faintly, the charm that she had exercised over him at the very beginning; illusive but delightful, a

grace that could not be imitated, a sweet seduction that was her herself. She was the real tip-topper; and whether she loved him, feared him, or hated him, he felt that he could not let her go.

"Dear old girl, why are you so snappy to me? Don't you see that I want to make it up. Can't you let bygones be bygones?"

Even if he was silent, smoking his pipe reflectively, only glancing at her from time to time, Claire understood. No words were needed. Before he took her by the wrist, slid his hand up her arm, gently drew her to him, and gave her a wine-tainted kiss, she knew that her turn had come round again.

In the morning when the light came creeping in and she saw his face upon the pillow at her side, she sprang out of the bed. He would go on sleeping like this for many more hours; but she looked back, dreading that her sudden violent movement might have wakened him. She looked at him, his hair all tangled, his puffy cheeks sleep-soiled, a red stubble glistening on his heavy chin beneath the uncombed moustache; and she fled into the bathroom to wash herself—to wash in hot water and in cold water, feeling that she could never wash away the stain of contact with those lips.

CHAPTER XX

"OH, Mother, help me. I'm too miserable. But for Gladys, I should commit suicide."

"Claire!"

"I do still belong to you all. Other families don't allow anyone belonging to them to suffer as I have. They interfere—to protect her, to save her. Mother, don't refuse. Help me—let the others help me."

Mrs. Gilmour sat aghast. It was comparatively late in the evening, and Claire had found her alone in the dining-room seated by a meagre wood fire, and still knitting; like the last gallant survivor of those knitting parties that used to assemble so light-heartedly in the days when the war was young and gay. Instinct and not reason had brought Claire here. It was the cry of an almost broken heart suddenly destroying that myth of the happy marriage in which Mrs. Gilmour had taken pleasure for such a long time.

"I fear, Claire, that you would find every single member of the family raise insuperable objections to your proposal;" and she was about to rise from her chair, but her daughter clung to her arm and detained her.

"Mother dear, don't get up and walk about. At least stay by me. I'm so utterly alone, except for my darling Gladys, that you don't know what comfort I feel even in holding your hand like this. Don't, don't make me feel that I'm quite nothing to you—that I am cast out, and abandoned to my fate."

"My dear child, of course not. You are evidently greatly overwrought, or you would not use such expressions. But now collect yourself and tell me with complete frankness what has put all this into your head?"

Then in order to support her case Claire told the story of Mr. and Mrs. Granville Budleigh.

Mrs. Granville triumphantly defying Granville had gone to France and driven a motor car for months and months. Then they had come together again, living in London because Granville was temporarily employed at the War Office, and their quarrels were worse than ever. But now his family had intervened, and decided that in the interest of all parties—themselves, as much as the unhappy pair—the union must be brought to an end. Lady Paramont, finding strength for this as well as for all her gigantic war activities, had convened the heads of the family, and had insisted that the lamentable state of affairs could not be allowed to continue. Without saddling the responsibility and blame on either of them, she had just firmly insisted that they must be separated. And the whole family had agreed that separation was the only cure for insupportable distresses.

"I do not know them," said Mrs. Gilmour simply. "Brimling Budling, do you say? I have never even heard the name."

"But Uncle Derek knows them well, Mother. He is a very old friend, if not a connection; and he approves most heartily. He came to tell me about it, and he said: 'Why should two people be allowed to tear themselves to pieces? Is not such a cat-and-dog existence a travesty of marriage?' Mother, on my honour, those were Uncle Derek's very words. They made such an impression on me that I am not likely to forget them—for, naturally, they made me think of myself."

"Derek is carried away by the tide of these new, and to my mind, thoroughly objectionable ideas. It is the war, I suppose, turning everything upside down—and, as bad as the war itself, all these new people suddenly rich, while well-bred, self-respecting people are being slowly ruined." And Mrs. Gilmour figeted her legs and sighed. "I pray

that we shall return to saner notions in the years to come."

Claire assured her that Granville Budleigh's people did not belong to the newly rich; they were well-bred people, very old-established, just the sort of people that her mother had always respected.

But Mrs. Gilmour only shook her head.

"Claire," she said all at once, "You really must excuse me and not think it unkind if I get up. It is not only that I have been bothered with pins and needles in my feet since the shortage of fuel began and roaring fires became a thing of the past, but with me movement always aids the action of the mind. I seem to *think* better when on my legs." Then she gave Claire's hand a friendly squeeze, got up, and began to move about the room.

"And certainly, Claire, if ever anything demanded careful thought, it is the communication you have made to me. I can't conceal from you that it has fallen as a dreadful blow. But you were right to tell me, Claire; and already I begin to hope that, having eased yourself by this confidence, you will soon feel able to take a more cheerful view;" and she paced to and fro for a little while in silence. "I am trying to recall the name of a play written by Sir Arthur Pinero. *Across the Seas!* No, that is wrong. I have it on the tip of my tongue." And suddenly she stopped walking and turned triumphantly. "*Mid-Channel!* Did you ever see that play acted, Claire?"

"No, Mother," said Claire in a desolate voice; "but I have read it. I know exactly what you are going to say."

"I don't think you can, Claire. I was going to say that to my mind you and Roddy are simply in the position of the characters in the play—the husband and wife who disagreed. You and Roddy are in mid-channel."

"No," said Claire forlornly, "we're in the middle of the

Atlantic Ocean, with our ship split in two by icebergs, going down, and no help in sight. And you forget, the wife in the play killed herself."

"Claire!"

As she sat gazing at the hearth the flames of the wood fire were sufficient to light up her face, showing the delicate profile and the slender chin all bright and aglow, obliterating with radiance that look of a person over-driven, hunted, vainly seeking escape, which might have been observed when she was speaking just now. But the drooping sadness of her attitude somehow forced itself painfully on the attention of Mrs. Gilmour, and it was with great affection that she came and patted Claire's shoulder before she resumed her promenade.

"I have been so proud of you, dear—really citing you as an instance and an example. To me marriage has always been such a sacred thing—there is no other word for it. And when I saw you so thoroughly happy, as I always believed, and never a breath of scandal—not so much as a whisper—well, it was a constant joy to my mother's heart. Seeing you so pretty, and so greatly admired—seeming at one time drifting towards the vortex of the very smartest set—and no one able to hint a word to your disparagement, you don't know how proud it made me. And now in a moment to be told that we are to be plunged into what must be a terrible scandal."

"There need be no scandal. Mother, I have done nothing wrong."

"But what would everybody think when they heard you were separated from your husband? What would not the talk be—even if the newspapers left us alone? I should simply feel myself a prisoner in this house. I could not go out and face people. Oh, no, Claire," and Mrs. Gilmour spoke with much feeling, "you really must spare us. As your mother, I do appeal to you not to drag us all through such an ordeal as *that*."

Claire said little more; but while her mother talked on stared at the dancing flames of the fire. They were not unlike Mrs. Gilmour's thoughts: flashing feebly here and there, fading, dying down, then bursting out in another place, and again returning to the same spot.

"Take Cyril to begin with. He would never for a moment consent." And, digressing, Mrs. Gilmour enlarged upon her delight in Cyril's marvellous change of character. The war had been the making of him. He was now a staff-officer; also a man with settled convictions, grave and serious, full of lofty aims, and holding the very strictest views with regard to propriety and decorum of conduct in all relations of life. "And that reminds me of the havoc that would be wrought in Cyril's career if you persisted—yes, I must say it,—if you selfishly persisted after what I am going to tell you. It is a secret—but no matter. Cyril did not go to see you during his last leave, did he? No. Well, dear, he was very much *occupied*." She said this archly and gaily. Then in a solemn tone she told the secret of Cyril's engagement to Lady Esther Leach, the elder daughter of that well-known religious and philanthropic peer, Lord Bedminster. The young lady was a little older than Cyril, but a noble, high-minded creature, reared in the midst of piety and good works. Now was it to be supposed that either she or her relatives would continue to contemplate alliance with a family concerning which Claire had occasioned chatter and evil report? The match would be at once broken and Cyril's heart with it. "No, dear, is it likely that you will get any assistance from Cyril?"

Then she told Claire another secret. Leonard Joyce had deserved well of his country by working at one of the new ministries after his own office hours, and Emily was eagerly waiting for the next Honours List, confident that her husband's name would appear in it under the heading, *Knighthoods*. Further, Claire's eldest brother John, for

eminent services in connection with shipping, would almost certainly be given his long-delayed and over-ripe baronetcy. But might not the Government, now more than ever cautious as to public opinion, be fearful of permitting the fountain of honour to play upon anybody whose connections were involved in domestic disputes and consequent ill-natured gossip? "No, it would be idle to expect either Leonard or John to take such a risk, and back you up, Claire, at such a time as this."

And Mrs. Gilmour summed up this side of the argument by asking Claire, in effect, could she be cruel enough for her own selfish ends and rather than submitting patiently to a little personal discomfort, to rob Cyril of an eminently respectable wife and deprive Emily, Leonard, and John of the legitimate gratification of a very natural and proper desire?

Then Mrs. Gilmour said a few words about herself. The war had not made her feel younger. Rather the reverse. Upsets upset her more than they used to do. "At my age, nights passed in the coal cellar when these inhuman fiends are bombing the defenceless town naturally try the health. I have answered every call in a patriotic spirit, without murmuring, and still this appalling taxation increases. My means, once considered large, are dwindling to nothing. Cyril's marriage will probably clean me out—as Leonard would say. High prices, fuel not available, food scarce, restrictions on lighting! No, believe me, Claire, these are not comfortable times to live in, either for you or anybody else. First they took my horses, then it was my car. I made no complaint. What must be, must be. Three-quarters of the house are shut up. Nearly all the women servants are gone. I am reduced to a solitary candle in the hall to save electricity. I dare say you noticed it. What would your father have said? My odd man is now an old, old fellow who comes every morning, and looks just like a Chelsea Pensioner out of

uniform. Last of all, if you please, they wanted to take Belton from me. But that," said Mrs. Gilmour very sternly, "they shall not do. Nothing shall make me part with old Belton."

Then her features relaxed and she smiled playfully. "This will amuse you, Claire. Between you and me, Belton is not nearly as old as he pretends. He keeps adding on the years to keep pace with the rising age limit. And always telling me tales about his infirmities! He shuffles about the house limping from chronic rheumatism, and he coughs, and waits at table in spectacles alleging defective eye-sight. Emily said I ought to make him go; but I thought that rather heartless of Emily—especially, considering her tenacity in keeping Leonard safe at home."

Claire, walking away from the house, thought of her family with all the bitterness of which she was capable. They would not help her, they made light of her trouble. They could not understand that it must be great indeed if it carried such loss of pride, as might be inferred by her being willing to let them know of it. Engrossed in their own affairs, they would not stir a finger on her behalf. And comparing them with that other family, the larger-minded relatives of Mr. and Mrs. Budleigh, she remembered what an unconverted Cyril used to say years and years ago. They were middle-class, half and half people, this family of hers; timid in their virtues, living always on the smooth surface of things; and dreading even a glimpse of the depths beneath.

She was going home by train from Sloane Square station, and as she passed the church she thought of her wedding. Just perceptible in the darkness the sacred building loomed high and black above her, its iron railings and chained gates invisible though almost within reach of her hand. Closed at night, it still did a brisk business by day. Claire thought of her own wedding and the hundreds of weddings solemnized there since then; the con-

tract lightly entered; the clergy taking no future responsibility, asking no questions, unless inquiring what extras were required, such as music, singing, flowers, and red carpets, pocketing their fees, just tying people together without a thought as to whether their piece of work was likely to lead to misery or not.

Presently on the station platform, hustled and pushed to and fro by the endless war crowd which now always seemed in movement, even late at night like this, she was thinking of how she had met Roddy here that day when he accompanied her on her visit to Nurse Mitchell. They stood just here watching the indicator board, waiting for the little fiery arrow to announce the Richmond train; she contended and at ease, innocent of all evil; and he gallant, deferential, wrapping her round with solicitous care. When the two lights came gliding towards them out of the tunnel, he gently led her forward. If she had known, it would have been better to throw herself under the train than get into the carriage with him.

About a week later she received a letter from Cyril imploring her not to allow her difference with Roddy to grow wider. The curious priggish eloquence of the letter astounded her. Truly the war had changed him from the Cyril who would not get up of a morning, and whose thoughts were habitually set to the music of revue choruses. He quoted the poetry of Rupert Brooke and the essays of "A Student in Arms" nowadays.

He said nothing of his engagement, as if that was a matter too delicate and refined for allusion when speaking to somebody in Claire's present state of mind; and his last sentence was at once an insult and a command. Lapsing towards slanginess, he told Claire to "drop it," to "run straight," and never to bring disgrace upon those who had always wished her well.

But Claire could not drop it at the outrageously-worded command of her brother Cyril.

Suddenly she had an idea that seemed like an inspiration. There was one person who would not only understand everything, but be able to give her counsel and guidance. That was Evan Giles. She had the innocent and still not uncommon belief that an author is wise and far-knowing beyond other men; moreover, Mr. Giles was a very old friend for whom she had always felt great respect. From her childhood he on his side had treated her with a very special consideration, showing in a hundred ways that he held her in affectionate regard. Mr. Giles would help her.

So she set forth at dusk one afternoon to seek him in his home at St. John's Wood. The houses of his road were low and old-fashioned, with little front gardens and tiny carriage drives; but this part of the town had been knocked about by air raids and many of the garden gates were barricaded. The whole road had a deserted and abandoned aspect as she passed along it in the gathering darkness.

She found the house at the end of the road, and as she stood on the steps of the porch, she heard sounds of noisy mirthful voices within.

A slatternly maid-servant said that Mr. Giles was at home, and Mrs. Giles too. "Come in," said the servant. "I want to shut the door. The police are so mighty particular about the lights showing."

Claire obeyed, but with embarrassment. She had not thought of Mrs. Giles. She knew that her old friend was married, although he never spoke of his wife. She had never seen Mrs. Giles at Hague House, or anywhere else.

"This way," said the servant, and next moment Claire was plunged into a brilliantly lighted dining-room with the merry party whose laughter she had heard all seated round the table at tea.

Mrs. Giles, a stout, red-faced woman of over forty, welcomed her in a manner which, although sufficiently cordial, did not set her at her ease.

"Never?" said this lady. "Mrs. Roderick Vaughan—Miss Gilmour that was! Well, this *is* a surprise—and an unexpected honour, too, I'm sure. Make room, you boys. Get up, Vi;" and she reproved her daughter for want of manners. "Now, Major, squeeze in a chair next to you. Evan, why don't you take Mrs. Vaughan's scarf, instead of gaping helpless?" And she laughed. "The most helpless being on this earth, Mrs. Vaughan—that husband of mine. Do please be seated."

"So glad to see you, Claire," Evan Giles was murmuring nervously. "So very glad, indeed. Vi, I'll take your chair, and Mrs. Vaughan shall have mine."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Giles gaily. "She must sit next to the author of 'Blind Purposes.' We're very proud of him, you know, though we don't read his books."

"And precious few other people read 'em either, as far as I can make out," said Mrs. Giles curtly.

Gradually then the disturbance caused by Claire's arrival subsided; everybody sat down again, and conversation was generally resumed. The daughter, a girl of twenty-one or twenty-two, was in uniform, and she laughed and joked freely with two young men who were dressed as officers of the Flying Corps. The major belonged to the A.S.C., with his headquarters somewhere close by. He also was red in the face, and neither so young nor so thin as he used to be. Evidently he enjoyed a reputation for having a merry tongue; and Mrs. Giles said once that he would be the death of her if he did not stop whispering. She gave Claire to understand that the major was a privileged person, and described him as an old flirt of hers. A thin, weather-beaten man of middle life had civilian costume of a sporting character, with an immense white hunting-scarf. He was part proprietor of livery stables, as Mrs. Giles explained, and throughout the war had been buying horses for the Government. She called him her "faithful aide-de-camp," and when he and the major con-

tested the right to fill her glass with more whisky and soda water, she said she would not have them quarrelling. And she bridled, and smiled at Claire, nodded as if to imply that these two were always disputing her favours and needed tactful management. Then, as if doubtful whether she had made her meaning apparent, she said, "Oh, these men, Mrs. Vaughan! What a lot of keeping in order they require, don't they? They pretend to be our slaves, but always wanting to tyrannize. But I needn't tell *you* anything—the beautiful Mrs. Vaughan, as they used to call you in the papers. How they did put your pictures in, to be sure! But, of course, the war has cut down the papers to nothing. Ruined literature, too—if we're to believe my husband's tale."

It was afternoon tea, but everybody except the host and his daughter was taking something stronger. There were decanters and black bottles on the sideboard; and Mrs. Giles again criticized Miss Vi's want of manners, because she did not persuade Mrs. Vaughan to have a glass of curaçao after walking about in the fog and cold.

"It's old stuff," she said. "Real curaçao—pre-war."

"Ah, me," said the major, ceasing to be merry, and speaking with great seriousness. "The old stuff is becoming scarcer every day. I don't know what we are coming to." And he lamented the loss of certain of his official privileges. He could no longer get whisky out of bond and give a bottle or two of the real article to friends, as he used to do in the earlier days of the war.

Then again they laughed and joked amongst themselves, leaving Claire unquestioned, while she drank her cup of luke-warm tea. They were all going later on to a place of entertainment, the major driving them first to a restaurant in his big Government car; but there was time for a game of bridge between now and then. Mrs. Giles and her two flirts would play cards, and one of the flying

officers should make a fourth, while the other "did a quiet spoon, with Vi." There was much pleasant fun as to which should play and which should sit out. All talked together.

"I'll toss you for the lady. Heads the spoon, tails the table." . . . "I'll stand your losses, and you shall keep your gains if you'll give her up to me." . . . "Oh, you boys." . . . "Mother, I object. I'm not going to be bandied about in this undignified manner." . . . "All right, let her decide herself." . . . "Now, that's a fair offer." . . . "Miss Vi, say which you prefer, and put them out of their misery."

"Oh, no," said Miss Vi archly, "that would be telling."

In the midst of it all, Evan Giles sat silent and repressed, only rousing himself to murmur nervously to Claire. He looked old and worn and sad, his long grey hair untidy, his velveteen jacket faded and rubbed, quite threadbare at the wrists. Claire noticed, too—indeed, no one could have helped noticing—the lack of respect shown to him, both by his wife and his daughter. They made stupid jokes about him, as though it was a custom of the house. The daughter was merely flippant; but the wife was rude, and one caught an ugly, sneering tone in her voice that was very repellent.

"Won't Mr. Giles take a hand?" said one of the young men.

"The talented author of *The Dream Valley* doesn't know one card from another," said his daughter.

"Mark of genius, we're to suppose," said his wife sneeringly.

"P'raps Mrs. Vaughan will oblige?"

"No," said Giles gently. "Mrs. Vaughan and I are going to have a quiet chat together. You must come into my den, Claire."

"Den!" said Mrs. Giles. "Pig-sty, *I* call it. And, look here, Evan, if you're going to drag Mrs. Vaughan in

there, you just ring the bell and tell the girl to light the gas fire."

"I'll light it myself," said Giles quietly. "Put on your cloak again, Claire. Let me help you."

He led her across the narrow hall into the untidiest room that she had ever seen in her life. It was lined with book-shelves, but half the books that ought to have been on the shelves were on the floor, or on the large, central writing-table, or on the seats of chairs; and the remainder were tossed about as if mischievous children had been playing with them. Everywhere, in basket trays and large portfolios, overflowing from the central table and other tables, there was an inextricable confusion of papers. Everything was dusty. The whole room smelt of dust and tobacco smoke, and when Giles rose from his knees after lighting the fire it began to smell of gas, too.

"It is sweet of you to come like this, Claire, and I am truly glad to see you. Such ages since we met—those jolly parties at your house. I hope the world has been treating you well—and your pretty little Gladys."

Now was the time for Claire to speak of her trouble and ask for his advice. But she could not do it. He was so evidently a man worried, harassed by his own thoughts. Absent-minded often, he now seemed preoccupied with some permanent care; here, in his own house, he was ill at ease, nervous, quite different from the Evan Giles she had come to find. She must postpone the purpose of her visit.

"And this is your workshop?" she said sympathetically; with genuine reverence and interest, yet innocently echoing the phrase of the professional visitor—"the room in which you do your beautiful work?"

"My beautiful work!" And he gave a sigh like a groan. Then he went on, with a smile, "Yes, dear Claire, this is the hallowed spot where I scribble away for dear life. My work just now is what we call book-making

rather than book-writing. Historical monographs! And I'm doing a little criticism—articles for the quarterlies. The solider form of fiction has gone down in this war, like so many other solid things."

They talked about books for a little while, although he seemed to be listening to the ebb and flow of noise that came from the card-players on the other side of the hall. He showed a sense of relief when Claire got up to go; but he said he would walk with her to the station.

"I'll say good-bye for you. But, no," he added nervously, "perhaps you had better do it yourself, if you don't mind;" and he opened a door. "Mrs. Vaughan is going."

"Oh, good-bye," said Mrs. Giles, without rising from the card-table. "Very pleased to have made your acquaintance. . . . Now, where are we? Major, you said Two Hearts, didn't you? Very well. Three diamonds."

Giles seemed more at ease directly they were outside the house, and as they walked side by side in the darkness he talked to her of his family. His boy Jack was a year younger than Violet, a dear fellow, just coming out of Sandhurst. Violet was a heart of gold, devoted to him really, although, like nearly all the girls of to-day, very independent and a little wilful. "One has to guard against adverse influences. I do my best, Claire." And then he seemed to be vaguely apologizing for his wife, or trying to excuse anything that might have seemed strange in her behaviour. "You won't judge by first impressions, Claire, I know. My wife is very *open* in her nature—by temperament fond of gaiety. Nowadays one cannot always choose one's friends too nicely. One has to let things drift a little when all the world is drifting."

The further away from the house that they went, the more cheerful he became, the less unlike himself. At the station he bought a ticket in order to go down with her to the platform, and as they walked to and fro, waiting for

her train, he was again the Evan Giles of her oldest memories. Then, if only there had been time, she would have opened her heart to him.

"You must come again, Claire. You have broken the ice. We gave you a dreadful reception to-day—but it will be all right on another occasion—no crowd—only ourselves. Promise to come soon."

And Claire said she would like to come very soon if she might. She wanted to consult him on a personal question.

"Yes, yes—I shall love to hear about it. Anything that concerns you, Claire. You know what I have thought of you ever since you were a child. And nothing has ever—can ever change you. In this ugly, ugly world you remain unaltered, unspoilt. . . . Now, we must hustle. I say. Ring up my wife on the telephone, and offer yourself, will you? She'll like that. She's very sensitive. Good-bye, Claire. Good-bye."

She followed his directions with regard to the telephone, when a few days later she asked permission to return to St. John's Wood, and Mrs. Giles at the other end of the wire answered very graciously, begging her to come to tea that same afternoon.

But things were not better on this second occasion; they were far, far worse.

Claire found the husband and wife alone, and no other visitors presented themselves. But Giles looked more careworn and nervous than ever, and Mrs. Giles was redder in the face. She was voluble, with abrupt gestures, and suffocating laughter that changed to angry expostulation when Giles interrupted her in an anecdote. Even if Giles had not incurred her further violent displeasure by a murmured suggestion that she should not neglect the teapot, it would have been painfully clear to the most innocent observer that she had already drunk more than was good for her from those bottles on the sideboard. Dressed

in outdoor costume, she had set her girlish toque at a queerly rakish angle, and the yellow curls on one side of her flushed face hung much lower than those on the other side.

"Well," she said, suddenly struggling to fix the clasp of her huge coat collar, "I'll leave you two to your confabs. I ought to have warned you, Mrs. Vaughan, that I had to be going out early."

Giles with a tortured smile, muttered something to the effect that she need not tear off in such a hurry. Her appointment would wait for a quarter of an hour.

"Oh, Mrs. Vaughan won't be huffed," she replied curtly. "It's you she came to see, not me."

"I came to see you both," said Claire gently.

"Did you?" said Mrs. Giles bridling. "Then that's a queer thing to happen with Evan's fine friends. You're the first that's ever troubled to do the civil to his wife."

"My dear," said Giles, "for heaven's sake don't drag out absurd old grievances."

But Mrs. Giles was not to be quieted. She asked Claire how she would like to have a husband who habitually went to parties at grand houses and left his wife at home. She vowed that Evan made a secret of his being married at all. If there was any amusement, instead of taking her to share in it, he sneaked off alone. "I put up with it, and always have; but I'm not going to pretend I enjoy begin snubbed and neglected. What's more, if he had any gentlemanly spirit——"

"Don't talk about things you can't understand," said Giles bitterly.

Claire did not know what to do or say, and next moment the dispute between the husband and wife burst into a noisy quarrel.

"That's enough," said Giles wildly. "For God's sake hold your tongue;" and he jumped up from his chair.

"No, Claire, don't run away. Come into my room. Don't leave me."

"Oh, pray don't leave him," and Mrs. Giles laughed. "I am going myself, Mrs. Vaughan."

Giles took the guest across the hall to the dusty workshop, and hurried back to close accounts with his wife. Claire heard them shouting, raving at each other. Then they were out in the hall, close to the workshop door, and it was impossible not to hear nearly every word they said. "I forbid you to go out while you are in this state"—Giles repeated the same sort of phrase again and again. "I forbid you to go and meet that man. I tell you, you are not in a condition to go flaunting about London." And suddenly his wife overwhelmed him with a torrent of fierce abuse. Claire, hearing it all, felt a thrill of horror and disgust. It was the brutal voice of a street virago turning against a policeman at a street corner, high-pitched, hoarse with rage, terrible. Next moment came the sound of scuffled footsteps; the front door opened, and closed with a bang that shook the house. Mrs. Giles had gone.

Evan Giles came into his workshop, and stood looking at Claire.

"How can I apologize to you," he said jerkily, "for, well, for losing control of myself?" His face was twitching, and his hand shook in a grotesque manner, as he automatically swept some books from the seat of a chair. "Really, Claire, to have allowed you to witness——" Then he sat down, put his hands to his brow as his grey head sank, and burst into violent noisy weeping. "Oh, my God—my God."

"Mr. Giles, don't, please don't. I'm so sorry—so dreadfully sorry." Claire had gone to him, and her hand touching his became wet with his tears.

"Can't pretend!" he said brokenly. "That's what she told you, didn't she? Well, my pretence has failed,

too. Oh, Claire, if you could understand how that common, passionate woman has destroyed me." And he moved his hand and struck his breast. "All that there was in me—the little spark—not divine fire, oh, no—but the little something good that gave me faith and hope."

It was most dreadful to Claire to see his grey hairs and glistening eyes, when presently he recovered some composure and told her the story of his ruined life. The ugly, littered room, with its confusion and disarray, seemed to symbolize the slow wreck of hope, the submission to chaos. Her heart bled for him; an immense pity flowed from her.

"Claire, those first books of mine were all right. Nothing great—no, no, far from it. We writers, Claire, can't be conceited, can't be mistaken—so long as our aim is high we *know* how miserably we fall short. But my poor stuff—*Blind Purposes*, and that—that other thing—had a lift in it. I was just off the ground. Those who knew, saw it was good work—so far as it went."

"It was beautiful work."

"Dear girl, *you* said so—and your praise was precious to me. But work of that sort is the fruit of thought and peace," and he made a despairing gesture.

"It can't be done in a house like this—with a companion sneering at you, goading at you, asking you why you don't make more money—gloating over things said against you in the press, counting the names of the men who have gone over your head since you began. Claire, I gave up the fight. Do you remember what Stevenson said about the artist who knowingly ceases to be conscientious in his work? That happened to me—it *had* to happen. I was lost; for my belief in myself was the thing I couldn't afford to give away. But she took it, Claire. She had taken everything else from me—and she took that, too."

He was calm again now; but nothing could check the stream of his words.

"Yes, I want to tell you, Claire. There's no need, I know. Your bright intelligence sees it all by now. But I've said so much, I'd like to tell you everything.

"I went on scribbling dully and stupidly, as people do when the light has gone out of them and their thought is only of gain. I didn't shirk, Claire. I have worked very hard, you know—to keep the pot boiling, clothe and feed the children, find their mother in cab fares when she went to meet her lovers, and pay the wine merchant's bill after she'd taken to drink.

"Of course she was unfaithful. She filled the noisy background of my life with possible, probable co-respondents—common brutes; grooms, horse-jockeys, anybody you like;" and he had a bitter smile. "That fellow from the livery stable, and that quartermaster fellow, that you saw the other day, were princes among them. Why didn't I divorce her? you'll ask. Claire, in the beginning I was cowardly about it. I dreaded the disgrace of it—and the loss of influence, too, that I should suffer as more or less of a public man. And, Claire, I'll confess the truth, even if it makes you feel contempt for me. In those early times I was still fond of her, the chain of the flesh still held me—I, well, I persuaded myself it was a fine thing to do to swallow my dishonour like a dose of filthy medicine now and then—and forgive and forget. Claire, I oughtn't to speak of such things to you. But it's all summed up in the *Kreutzer Sonata*, the truest and most atrocious book that a man ever wrote. We went on like that—like brute beasts, snarling, fighting, and then lying down together in the same lair.

"After that, when the last animal glow of love was gone, I just let things drift, and very soon it was too late. The children were growing too old. Claire, my only hope is that Vi may get decently married before she finds out

what her mother really was, and that Jack may have been so knocked about that he will be hard enough to stand it when the truth hits him in the face. Of course they both know she drinks; but they don't know anything else. Vi is quite innocent so far—quite straight, on my honour, Claire. Of course, too, I've weakly hoped that time would help me. She is close on forty-five, Claire. She, she must reform—or grow tired of men some day. But I shan't wait for that, if only I can see my girl and my boy established in life. I shall sing my *Nunc Dimittis* very quietly. Nothing theatrical or sensational—no last words or exit speech." And he smiled again. "Who cares or notices when a failure goes off the stage? Small paragraph at the bottom of a column—if it isn't crowded out by the pressure of more important news: 'Fatal accident to an author,' or, 'Mr. Evan Giles, a writer once popular with a certain class of readers, but long since forgotten, was found dead yesterday morning on the North London Railway.'"

Claire had jumped up, and again she touched his hand. "Oh, no, if you did *that*, it would indeed be cowardly, and unworthy of you." And forgetting something that she herself had said, she implored this broken-hearted man never to trifle even in thought with the terrible word suicide.

"No, Claire. Dismiss it from your dear pitiful mind. I ought not to have said it. Of course, I don't mean it. The people who talk as I did, *never* mean it, Claire."

And soon he spoke sensibly and philosophically, detaching himself from the personal point of view and trying to generalize.

"After all, I am no worse off than thousands of others. At the bottom of all such tragedies—for they *are* tragedies—lies the folly and injustice of our marriage law. It's a cursed law, Claire. If two people don't agree, can't live together happily, their marriage should be annulled at

once—without delay, without disgrace, without waiting for the sin and shame that will certainly come if they are kept tied together." Then abruptly he swung back to the personal standpoint. "Suppose she and I could have got free directly we found that our marriage was likely to prove a damnable failure—I mean twenty years ago—each of us might have been happy. We could have parted without pain—even with a kindly feeling. With another sort of man she might never have sunk. At least, she would have had a better chance."

Claire was thinking of herself now, and of the strange hazard that had made her think of asking Evan Giles to help her with advice. She went away presently, abashed by a misery that seemed greater than her own.

The impression created by that scene in the dusty, littered room did not fade easily; and longing, in however small a degree, to comfort him, she invited Giles to luncheon or to tea several times, when she was sure that Roddy would be out of the way. It was, outwardly, just the old Evan Giles who gladly availed himself of these invitations. He made no allusion to his domestic life; he was whimsical, genially cynical, and delightful in his treatment of Gladys.

She told Roddy of these visits, and he did not disapprove.

"I have not forgotten, Roddy, that you said I wasn't to ask him to meet your friends; but you don't mind his coming to a meal with Gladys and me when we are all alone?"

"Oh, I don't mind;" and Roddy shrugged his shoulders. "There's no accounting for tastes."

But then Mrs. Giles intervened. Feeling her dignity outraged, she had taken up her pen and written in a very offensive strain. Of late Roddy had developed a habit of opening Claire's letters, and he opened this one.

"There," he said, tossing it across the breakfast-table, "that's what you bring on yourself. Perhaps you'll see who was right, after all. Perhaps you'll drop that shabby, cadging humbug for good now."

Claire flushed hotly, as she in her turn read the impertinent note. Mrs. Giles presented her compliments to Mrs. Vaughan, and said that after the very strong hint she had let fall, she was at a loss to understand Mrs. Vaughan's conduct in inviting Mr. Giles to parties without his wife. She begged once more to remind Mrs. Vaughan that Mr. Giles was not a bachelor, but a married man.

Next day Evan Giles himself wrote to Claire, sadly explaining and apologizing.

"After what I have told you, you will understand the tremendous irony of the fact that *she* is always jealous of *me*. Once seen, you are too attractive, my dear Claire, for me to be allowed the solace of your friendship. Thank you, dear kind girl, for your pitying kindness. I have fallen low to let you know all my miserable secrets. O shade of Carlyle! A brave man should consume his own smoke? Burn this letter and forget

"Your unhappy E. G."

Claire burned the letter, but she always remembered its words. She never saw his handwriting or heard his voice again.

During this brief period of final intercourse with the friend of her youth, she had taken the extreme measure of asking legal advice in regard to her great desire. One morning she went to Gray's Inn, and consulted the solicitors of her family.

Mr. Collie, senior, the head of the firm, received her with much courtesy and kindness; but he was so engrossed by war grievances—such as the absence of his son, the

extra work thrown on his hands, the unfairness of the super tax, and so forth—that it seemed as if he could only give his client a divided attention. He certainly did not help her.

He said he thought a separation by agreement a very unsatisfactory way of doing things. Again, if Captain Vaughan did not agree, what then? No, he thought a judicial separation, if possible, would be the thing. But, still again, was it possible?

"If there has been infidelity, you don't seem to have any proof of it. You don't seem even to have protested against it. Your husband has not left you, and he has not been cruel to you." Then, seeing the surprised expression of Claire's face, Mr. Collie talked a little of cruelty as understood in the legal sense of the term. "What you have told me so far really only amounts to this: Your husband makes you *uncomfortable*. He is not a pleasant companion to live with, but——" and he made a deprecating gesture with his hands. "But, after all, your health hasn't suffered. It struck me, if I may say so, just now when you came into the room, that you were looking extremely well—and I suppose at my age I may venture to add, in very good looks;" and he bowed and smiled. "Of course, Mrs. Vaughan, I need not say that the services of the firm are entirely at your disposal in the matter—should you decide to carry it further. I only wish my son was here. Three and a half years they have detained him in the Army. Three and a half years, Mrs. Vaughan. I shan't wound you now by confessing I formed an unfavourable opinion of your husband when I first met him, before the marriage. Your relatives, however, allowed me to be over-ruled in every suggestion I made. By the way"—and he spoke briskly, as if stimulated by a new idea—"have you broached this subject to Mrs. Gilmour? I have a sort of notion that she won't take kindly to it."

And as he ushered Claire through the outer offices, and to the top of the old Georgian staircase, he talked of her mother.

"Mrs. Gilmour will not answer letters. I suppose I have written to her six times on a quite important matter —and not a word in reply. If you're seeing her I wish you'd jog her memory. You might just hint that as I am single-handed here, owing to the war, it is not very considerate to give me additional and unnecessary labour."

Mr. Collie could not or would not help Claire. No one would help her. People were too busy, too much preoccupied with their private affairs, even to understand or believe in her bitter need of help.

But Aunt Agnes understood. At the first vague word that her niece uttered she took fire.

"Of course, my poor angel, get rid of him. Don't hesitate a moment. Never mind what anybody says. What's it got to do with *them*, I'd like to know. No half measures, Claire. Go for him hammer and tongs. Divorce the brute."

Miss Graham was ill in bed; but she scrambled up to a sitting posture, tumbled off the lace shawl that had been covering her head, and let her white hair fall as she talked to Claire. Her eyes glittered; her weak voice thrilled with the strength of her convictions.

"First of all, if it's any question of money, I'll provide *that*. I don't care what it costs. I have nothing to do with my money except buy those irritating War Bonds. Every penny I possess is yours, Claire, if you want it."

And she said that directly she was well enough to go out of doors she would take Claire to some *real* solicitors —not namby-pamby idiots like those bow-wow Collies, but good, sharp-fanged dogs, who would get at Master Roddy's heels and never leave him till they had brought him down.

"Only one short little life, Claire; so why should anybody be martyrized in it? And *you*, of all people, you

poor defenceless child. Oh, Claire, if you knew how it has made my blood boil, and how I have writhed when forced to speak to him civilly."

Then Miss Graham, raising herself still higher on the pillows, fairly expressed her contempt of the existing system of marriage and divorce, and Claire seemed to be listening to the companion tirade of Evan Giles' outburst. Only, delivered with dry eyes and in an old lady's gently thrilling voice, it seemed so much stronger.

"Why should we submit to such antiquated, preposterous edicts? Who laid them on us, Claire? Why, a lot of nasty disgusting old priests, who kept concubines hundreds of years ago. What did they know of common sense or decent feeling, and who can be surprised if the whole law is worthy of Bedlam? And worse than the law itself are the muddled ideas that people entertain in relation to marriage. Never give in to them, Claire. They're so preposterously absurd, Claire, that they could only exist in such an addle-pated country as England."

And she spoke of what unfortunate wives suffer from cruel husbands; how their minds are ruined, and their bodies destroyed without redress. She spoke of their nerve strain, their depression of spirit, their slowly accumulating despair. It was most wonderful to hear—this old maiden lady, who was herself quite outside the circle of pain, saying more than Evan Giles. Nothing of the innermost mysteries of marriage was unknown to her.

Faithful to her promises, Miss Graham took Claire to see a solicitor whose business was largely concerned with matrimonial disputes; but, sharp and keen as this gentleman appeared to be, he was really no more helpful than Mr. Collie. He saw no immediate prospect of success. He thought it was a case in which a waiting game would pay best. If, as seemed probable, Captain Vaughan went from bad to worse, he might eventually become very bad

indeed; and then things would be quite easy. A divorce would be the most satisfactory conclusion.

And this was the advice of a high expert. Miss Graham left his office trembling with anger. Claire was to go back to her slavery, with no better hope than a tardy freedom to be won by further pain. She had tried all her friends and allies; and it seemed that only Time itself was able to help her.

She thought of the law, of what Aunt Agnes had said about it—a law for married people made hundreds of years ago by celibate priests of an alien religion; of what Evan Giles had said about it—a cursed law. And she remembered those earlier words of his, years and years ago, when they stood for a moment in the embrasure of a window before her marriage.

"There's no way out of it, Claire—no way that you would ever find."

Then as if fate and chance were mocking at her predicament, and diverting themselves by the addition of more elements to increase the confused tangle of her thoughts, they sent her old Uncle Derek one afternoon, so that he might tell her later chapters in the story of Mr. and Mrs. Granville Budleigh.

The gallant old fellow was dressed in his uniform as a special constable and he moved rather stiffly from rheumatism contracted on night duty, but he bore himself bravely as the kind soul he was—ready at all times to give his services to the call of duty, whether from friends or country. He betrayed a momentary surprise or perturbation at sight of Claire's war serving-maid and the velvet and pictures in her drawing-room; but as a well-bred man of the world he quickly suppressed all signs of the shock caused by poor Claire's queer surroundings, and sat down very comfortably to tell his tale.

"In all my experience, Claire, it really is the most extraordinary business. It seems as if one could never

get to the end of it. However, it *must* end now, and I want to ask you to assist us with your influence, if you possibly can. You know, you *have* influence. She spoke of you only the other day. Your opinion, if firmly expressed, will carry weight."

With this prelude, Derek began the story of latest developments. It seemed that after their family had decided on the separation the Granvilles had shown an unexpected reluctance to separate. They made all sorts of absurd excuses for delay; disregarding expostulations, even menaces, they continued to reside together, quarrelling and being talked about just as much as ever. Then, the patience of their family wearing out, it was determined to bring them both to reason by the withdrawal of monetary supplies from Granville.

"And now, my dear Claire," said Derek, opening his kind old eyes widely, "this astounding fact has come to light. *They are not married at all.* Would you believe such a thing? Never married! Of course, you know, *she* held the wildest and most advanced views about women's rights and everything else; so the blame may be hers. But Lady Paramont, who is absolutely furious, thinks it is Granville's fault. He gives the lamest possible explanation—some childish nonsense about their trying to get married twice, but each time a technical mistake of theirs preventing the registrar from doing it. And after that he says they were *afraid* to go on with it. Anyhow, there is no doubt of the fact itself. It is unfortunately but too true."

And Uncle Derek touched on the natural wrath of Lady Paramont and the other matrons of the family. Here you had two young people masquerading as husband and wife for years, moving freely in the best society, staying in the bosom of the most exclusive but quite unsuspecting country houses. Even nowadays, with the universe more than upside down, that really was beyond

a joke. "So I am sure that you, Claire, will agree with Lady Paramont—as I do myself most fully—that it must be ended now and at once."

"But, Uncle Derek, what does Lady Paramont propose?"

"Why, of course, to get them married without an hour's avoidable delay;" and the kind old man's eyes became round and large again. "What else can be done but regularize their position as speedily as possible—and as quietly, of course? Anyhow, it has got to be done, and one can only hope it will escape notice in the general turmoil, and that there'll be no talk. But, Claire, would you believe it? they are both showing reluctance. Now if you could influence *her* . . ."

When Uncle Derek had gone, Claire sat thinking about it confusedly.

This, then, was the reading of Mrs. Budleigh's sphinx-like riddle. One could understand now her enigmatic smiles, her defiant attitude, her refusal to submit to a husband's control; and it seemed to Claire that Mrs. Budleigh had more than hinted at the truth, had even been once or twice on the point of telling it to her. She had said things—"Mrs. Vaughan, I wish you would persuade our relations to leave us alone. Jack and I understand each other perfectly well"—and then she had checked herself, with a smile.

Most wonderful. They were absolutely free, not bound to each other in any way, and yet they hung together. They quarrelled and made it up. They parted and soon rejoined. They were like cat and dog, and yet they could not do without each other. One could only explain by supposing that there was no real incompatibility of temper. The squabbles were on the surface, but below the eddying noise there must be some deep, calm current of true affection; at least, even if they did not love, each mysteriously had need of the other. And Claire, though

perplexed, thought she could understand. Granville forgave because there was no real wrong. Mrs. Granville flirted and flaunted, danced gaily through the conventions; only she was not unvirtuous. Some rule made by herself prevented her from going too far. She was essentially nearly all that a wife need be. But she clung to her freedom because she refusd to be a slave.

But their family? Who could understand *them?* They were worse than the Gilmours. When they believed that the Budleighs were married, they insisted on dissolving the union. When they knew that the Budleighs were without bonds they insisted on firmly uniting them. Was that rational? Was it not like the behaviour of people whose proper place is Bedlam?

And Claire thought of more words of Aunt Agnes. Worse than the law itself are the muddled ideas that people entertain in relation to marriage; so fantastically absurd that they could only be tolerated in such an addlepated country as England.

CHAPTER XXI

IF possible, the darkening of London grew deeper in this fourth winter of the war. The black nights, made more hideous still by the roar of our own guns and the crash of the enemy's bombs, seemed to be symbolic of the whole world going to pieces. One felt reckless, and yet afraid. The fate of mankind was at stake; civilization was going out in darkness; it was a time when all must watch and pray.

But in the midst of the world-tragedy Claire had no leisure for any thought beyond her own trivial sordid woes.

They had left the house with the velvet sofas and were occupying a small flat on the top floor of a building in the Marylebone Road. Its perilous position had enabled Roddy to secure it almost rent-free, and as he so often slept away from home he did not mind the risk. Claire was his servant now, because no real servant would consent to stay with them. A charwoman came by daylight to help her with the rougher work.

And here in this narrowed space, in rooms not much bigger than large cupboards, a new struggle had begun. It was money now. All else seemed comparatively insignificant in importance. In the past she had been careless, willing to buy his complaisance at any cost, not really looking far ahead, although she had spoken sometimes of an ominously threatening future. But now her alarm had suddenly awakened to the nearness of the danger. Roddy would take their all, and then leave her and Gladys naked to face a shattered world.

Mr. Collie, useless in other respects, had aroused her to a clear understanding of their position. Summoning all her strength to meet the storm, Claire told Roddy that

he must stay his hand now; she would not ever again consent to his touching their capital.

The storm came, but she did not break beneath its force, and Roddy, when his first wrath had blown itself out, affected calmness. He adopted sometimes a tone of kindly banter, mingled cajolery with argument. "Poor little woman, afraid that the kid will run short of grub one day? But that's all bosh. And remember—what I've told you once before—Gladys is my daughter as well as yours." By this echo of an old threat he twice overcame her resistance; squeezing from her another thousand pounds, and still another.

The cruel fight went on. But Claire was fighting for her child's sake. She could be very brave for Gladys. As she thought of Gladys there lay upon her always the shadow of a great fear. It was a shadow only, because she dared not admit or even think of the fear itself, but its cold dead weight was vast enough to make all other fears seem light.

She went again to Mr. Collie, and he told her that it was her own money and she could do what she liked with it. He advised her to pull up Captain Vaughan quite short, by cancelling that old arrangement at the bank, by withdrawing the authority for him to sign cheques, by tearing up any papers that he tried to make her sign herself.

And these things Claire was brave enough to do, bowing to the tempest that they raised, but never breaking. She was fighting for a loved life, and she told Roddy he might kill her, but he should not make her yield. She said that she would cash a cheque every week, give him half its amount and with the other half pay for their household.

"Ha, ha!" He laughed and blustered. "No two ways about it—dotty on the crumpet. So that's the idea now, what? I am to pose as a pensioner on my lady's bounty. Not much. By——" and he fired his best volley of oaths.

"Take care, my girl. Don't drive me too far. Look here. You'll just shove on your hat and come down with me to the bank and put things straight again. And after that you'll go on by yourself to these damned lawyers of yours and instruct them to send me a written apology for the insult they've put upon me. Do you hear?"

Claire heard, but she would not obey; and the abominable fight went on.

He bullied, bellowed, and she bore it all. She still stood firm. Sometimes she thought he was about to strike her, and she never crouched but stood with unaverted eyes, waiting for the blow. Sometimes, when he was living at the flat, they scarcely spoke to each other for days. In frowning silence he ate the food that she had cooked for him, with a grunt took a glass from her hand as she waited on him, or pointed at the mantleshelf when he wanted the matches to light his pipe. And he would sit smoking and brooding at the table till, with the pipe still in his mouth, he nodded, drooped, and fell asleep. She sat quietly with Gladys; came back into the room from time to time to see if he had awakened and she might clear away the refuse of his meal.

Sooner or later, after these fits of silence, he would burst out with a roar of anger and renew the fight.

"No, by God, I'm not going to stand it. This fooling must cease." He had awakened, or sprung up from the armchair in which he had been lolling and dozing. "Claire, come here. Where the devil are you?"

"It's all right, Roddy. I am coming to you."

And he would take her by the arm so roughly that his grip made a bruise, bringing his face close to hers, and beginning to shout and threaten. If there had been other inhabitants of this top floor they would have complained of the repeated disturbance. This man's loud voice penetrated the flimsy partitions, the woman's voice could be heard at intervals, and that child of theirs was uttering

cries of agonized terror in another of the rooms. The desperate fight was going on.

Then all at once Claire noticed a great difference in his treatment of her. One morning he helped her carry the breakfast tray. He talked to her freely of indifferent things, went in and tried to ingratiate himself with Gladys by giving imitations of all the animals in a farmyard. He offered carelessly but pleasantly to take Claire out to dinner. "Oh, all right, please yourself. I only thought it might save you trouble." And for all that day and the next he was like an old acquaintance who has been absent for a long time and who now seeks to pick up all the severed threads of friendship. But for the doubt and discomfort that it aroused in her, this new manner would have been ludicrous.

"Have you had time to glance at the paper, Claire? Not much news in it, and what there is none too cheerful. By Jove, it's a hard job to keep up one's spirits nowadays. One wants something to take one out of oneself." And he snapped his coarse fingers and whistled. "Happy thought! Claire, I'll take you to a cinema show—take the kid, too, if you like. Nothing like the moving pictures to cheer you up when you feel down on your luck."

Claire refused this treat; she had work to do. But he told her he thought she was wrong to neglect a cheap and gratifying amusement that lay so easily accessible. He returned again and again to this subject of cinema theatres, telling her what a big place they would soon take in our national life, and how enormous were the fortunes made by them.

Gradually then, he let her understand that he had lately fallen in with some very influential men belonging to this wonderful industry, that they had "taken to him," that they seemed disposed to give him a chance of joining them in fresh projects. He affected to take it for granted

that she would be cheered by his tidings, and he reported to her from time to time how matters stood.

"They pledge themselves to nothing, Claire, so far; but they show no sign of wanting to turn me down."

After being out he would return to the flat, rub his hands, and beam at her.

"Claire, old girl, I've had another long interview with Pottinger—you know—the boss of the whole shoot—and I must say it was of a very promising character. Yes, I do think things begin to look more hopeful for down-trodden old Roddy."

She knew now, of course, what was coming, and she knew instinctively that it would bring a fight more bitter and more cruel than any she had yet passed through. She tried to steel herself for the ordeal. But his delay in opening his attack enervated her. She was conscious of a pressure that never ceased, that was always increasing, and still he had said nothing of the money he intended to wring from her. In spite of herself he forced her to talk of his hopes, to give him the semblance of sympathy; and he tacitly implied always that she was to be relied on as an ally and well-wisher.

"Glorious if it comes off, won't it be, Claire?"

And he had not even vaguely indicated yet what "it" was.

Then all at once, he announced in the most natural manner, that to this extent at least "it" *had* come off. Pottinger was ready to take him into the new stunt as half-partner. For the partnership Roddy would have to put down five thousand pounds: in other words, nearly half of their remaining capital.

"So there you are, Claire. It's to take or leave. Stop. Don't say anything now. I haven't time. I must change my things. I am going back to them."

And he did what he had not done for a long time; he dressed for dinner. When he came back into the sitting-

room presently in his broad shirt front and rather dirty white waistcoat, she saw that his eyes were bright with excitement, and that he had shaken off something of the lazy heaviness of carriage that for so long had been habitual. The vision of wide gains was bringing him to life again. He stretched himself and stood quite erect, while she helped him on with his overcoat.

"Thanks. Now are you going to live up to your reputation and show your pluck? It's now or never, Claire. I feel this is my last chance, and it's not coming again."

"Roddy, I can't do it. Surely you must see that I can't do it."

"I know what you mean. You're worrying about the kid, and what might happen to her if it went down. But it isn't going down. It's going to turn up trumps. Think what that would mean to her. Why, our Gladys might be the biggest heiress in England. No rot—I mean it. This film racket is fairyland. It's colossal; it staggers the imagination. Pottinger will tell you so. He's coming to see you to-morrow, to try to interest you in it. I've told him I can't force you—and don't intend to." He was talking volubly, eagerly, almost as he used to do before the war. "If you say No, it's a wash-out. But don't say No till you've made up your mind. Think it over quietly. Ta-ta. I'm late." And he hurreid out of the tiny hall and down the steep flight of stone stairs.

Mr. Pottinger came panting up them on the following afternoon, to increase the pressure.

He was middle-aged and very large, with a fat, freckled face that creased itself into ugly smiles. The rims of his pale blue eyes seemed to be permanently inflamed, and they had no eyelashes. His sandy hair grew long round the bald crown of his head, and there was a reddish fluff of it on the backs of his hands and reaching to the knuckle joints of his stubby fingers. These hairy hands drew a fascinated attention as he trifled with a massive gold

watch-chain. In speech he was slow and yet glib, mouthing the big words in an un-English fashion. Claire surmised that he was a citizen of the world rather than belonging to any fixed nationality. Also, something in his way of talking of pretty film actresses and his manner of looking at her herself stirred subtle feminine instincts and made her guess, too, while trying to stifle the thought, that he was a man who at one period of his life had been cruel to women, and perhaps even grown fat upon the proceeds of their shame. She dreaded him, and hated him, while she sat listening with her daughter's small, trembling hand in hers.

At inordinate length he told her all about his schemes.

"Now your husband, Mrs. Vaughan, would be my representative on the other side. There has been a tendency because of its novelty to allow this industry to drop into the hands of vulgar, illiterate people; and prejudice has been the result. We need cultivated, high-bred gentlemen of the calibre of your husband to combat that prejudice." And so on.

The pressure continued. In the evening they forced Claire to go to dinner with them at a small Italian restaurant in the Euston Road; and here, in an evil-smelling back room, with so low a ceiling that Mr. Pottinger was able to reach it with his heavy hand and sweep from its cracked paper groups of hibernating flies, Roddy and his new friends ate greasy Italian stews and drank Chianti wine of the fierce, common sort that makes already fiery peasants stab each other in the warm darkness of olive groves and vineyards on summer nights. Seated among them, Claire, pale and watchful, looked like a person who has been cornered by a confidence-trick gang, who recognizes them all as accomplices, but who tries to conceal any signs of apprehension and vainly searches for a speedy means of escape.

There was another middle-aged man, who echoed every-

thing that Mr. Pottinger said, and corroborated all his statements regarding the El Dorado of the "movies." There were two women; one mature and haggard, described indifferently as Mr. Pottinger's secretary and housekeeper; the other quite young and very small, spoken of by Mr. Pottinger as his protégée. He also said that this girl was a bundle of talents, that he proposed to make her a world-famous film star before he had finished with her, and that her diminutive stature was an asset of considerable value. "A woman," he declared, "may be very beautiful, with perfect features and a voluptuous figure; but if she is really large-built, she will prove a deception every time you throw her on the screen."

The coarse, strong wine eventually showed its effect on all the party. Both the ladies were flushed, and they babbled of sovereigns and dollars; Roddy tapped the table with a fork and gave his imitation of a barn-door fowl; for a little while the thin gentleman was troubled by hiccoughs and could only corroborate his chieftain with an ugly little gulp. Mr. Pottinger himself preserved his yellowish-white complexion unchanged, and his slow but fluent utterance unthickened. Only the Chianti made him boastful.

He said that he meant getting there all the time. If people stood in his light he brushed them out of the way, just as he had served those flies on the ceiling. Then he talked of the relations of the two sexes, saying that for a thousand reasons women could never boss the partnership. Nature had given her her place, and she must keep in it.

The mean little room had an atrocious atmosphere by now, laden with the odours of the greasy food, the fumes from flaring gas-jets, and full of tobacco smoke; and the little band of people looked sinister and dangerous, as they sat there surrounding the pale and silent stranger that they had somehow lured and caught.

Mr. Pottinger kept his lidless eyes fixed on Claire's

face, waving away the cloud of smoke when it obscured his view of her, and he talked on interminably about men and women.

It might shock certain susceptibilities, but he entertained no doubt that corporal punishment was efficacious in the training of young artistes. And a great truth lay behind that. Women bowed to strength and determination. They liked to feel that the man they loved and respected could make himself feared, too. What did William the Conqueror do when courting Matilda? He gave her a good hiding, and she liked him all the better for it. That was a long time ago. "But if I was the husband of a woman who opposed her will to mine, well—— What's that memo you're scribbling, Mrs. Vaughan?"

Claire had written something on an envelope and was trying to get Roddy to read it.

"Your wife is making signals to you, Vaughan," said Mr. Pottinger.

"Eh, what?" Then Roddy examined Claire's message:

"It is very late. I must go back to the flat. I am afraid of leaving Gladys alone any longer."

"Oh, all right," and he rose from the table, with a surly air. "The missus wants to go home, and think it over."

"Really?" said Mr. Pottinger. "Surely not? Mrs. Vaughan will hardly break us up like this, with nothing settled." His manner had changed. "I understood this meeting was to fix it definitely. Stay, Mrs. Vaughan."

But Claire had moved round the table quickly and was halfway to the door. "Stop her, Vaughan." And with Roddy by her side she stood at the opened door. "Say now, Mrs. Vaughan. It seems to me, with your husband's approval, I best wait on you some time to-morrow, and

put things straight before you, so's there'll be no further mistake."

And that night Roddy was violent again. He said they must have the money.

Next day he went out before the arrival of Pottinger, and said he would return again after the interview. It was at dusk when she heard the visitor's footstep on the stone stairs, and in the pause before he rang the bell she turned on all the electric light throughout the flat. The thought arose that on this deserted upper floor there was nobody within call. She received him alone in the sitting-room, with Gladys hidden in the next room, and as she led him through the hall her heart beat fast. A sense of defencelessness came full upon her as he closed the door behind them. This man was wicked, dangerous, and perhaps desperate.

But he began very quietly, his hands playing with the gold watch-chain, his face creased in smiles.

"Now I'd like to say to you at once, Mrs. Vaughan, that I sympathize with you in your embarrassment; but I am placed in a very considerable embarrassment myself. If I could help you, I would do it. But the question is, haven't things gone too far? Isn't it too late, any way, for you to back out?"

"I am not backing out," said Claire. She had meant to speak strongly and firmly, but her voice was scarcely louder than a whisper. "I have had nothing to do with it."

The man smiled at her.

"I assure you"—and Claire's voice gathered tone—"I have not made a single promise."

He raised his hand as if begging her to say no more.

"Mrs. Vaughan, accepting for a moment your view of the situation—that is, that you and your husband are acting independently—just see my embarrassment;" and he brought out a bulging pocket-book and held it on his knee. "I have in here his letters representing himself

as a man of capital, whereas I am now to understand he is a man of straw. But *I* have acted on the strength of those letters. Now it appears it is *you* who are in truth the capitalist. I do not know all the intricacies of your laws. I am more acquainted with the code on the other side. But aren't we up against a difficult proposition, anyhow? If you withdraw, how does Mr. Vaughan figure? Mrs. Vaughan, I can assure you I have gone a long way ahead on the promises I have received. Why, see now, I can prove that to you. I have paid passage money for Mr. Vaughan to New York. I have surmounted all the passport difficulties and got his papers right through. No easy matter. He will sail with us on the 20th instant—or thereabouts. Unless—unless you want him arrested 'tween now and then for obtaining money under false pretences."

"I—I'll pay you back the passage money."

He waved his hand and smiled. "That's a very small matter—mentioned by me merely as proof of my words. It's not the hundredth part of his obligation."

"Then—then I can't help it. He must take the consequences."

"Mrs. Vaughan, that strikes me as a harsh thing to say. Your husband would judge it so, if I repeated it to him. But I shan't do that. No, no. Mrs. Vaughan, I have made a pretty shrewd guess at the friction between you and your husband, and what you would have to expect from him if——"

He had moved from his chair and Claire moved too. Every time he moved she changed her position, so as to keep the same distance between them. He brought a chair now to a table near the middle of the room, sat down, and while he talked spread out some bits of paper on the table.

"I have with me here bills of different dates for the necessary amounts. Your husband concurs that this will be the simplest method, as it gives time for the realization

of your securities. Now I feel pretty sure, Mrs. Vaughan, that before I quit, you are going to sign them."

"No," said Claire faintly. "I won't sign them."

"If I leave them your husband will *make* you sign them."

"If you leave them I shall burn them."

"You're a brave and stiff-lipped little lady, but is it wise to bring trouble on yourself? As I read your husband, he's a man of strong feelings. If I report to him I've failed, he's likely, as I judge, to make things very *very* hard for you."

"That's my concern, not yours."

"Just so. But see now, Mrs. Vaughan, he has pledged your credit and he means you to make good. If I know human nature, you've got to give in. True, there's no tremendous hurry. It's ten days from now to the 20th. You may have a lot to go through in less than ten days. Why not give in now and save yourself?"

"I have given you your answer."

"I am to go and tell him you refuse, and send him back to you at that?"

"Yes," whispered Claire.

"He'll be wild—mighty wild." The man was putting the bits of stamped paper back in his wallet, and Clarie watched his slightest movements. "Ten days to change your mind—to *have* to change your mind, eh? Well, if you mean it, there's not much more to be said."

"There's nothing more to be said." Claire's eyes never left his face. "So, so you can go, if you please, now."

He moved, with hairy hand outstretched; and Claire retreating round the small room, opened the door in passing. When he stopped moving she stood still, her eyes on his face, and pointed to the open door.

"If you want to shake hands, it is unnecessary. Go, if you please."

And to her inexpressible relief he obeyed her.

"You and I will meet again, Mrs. Vaughan." He said this as he passed through the doorway. Directly she heard the closing of the hall door she rushed to it and bolted it. Then she came back, all white and shaking, half hysterical, and went to Gladys to console her for her long seclusion. It was time for the child to go to bed. Claire undressed her, sat by her bed and read aloud; tried to get her comfortably asleep in this space of time while she herself was waiting, listening for the return of Roddy.

"Roddy, are you alone?" It was an hour later and she was speaking through the hall door.

"Yes, of course I am."

Then she unbolted the door and let him in. He came in, kicked the door to with his foot, and uttered a curse as she followed him into the sitting-room.

"Roddy," she said wildly, "I used to ask you not to swear at me, but I don't mind now. I—I'd rather you bully me yourself, than send other men. That wasn't kind, Roddy—not, not worthy. He, he threatened for you. Why don't you hit me yourself?"

He had gone to the fireplace; and as he turned upon her she took his hand and clung to him, speaking with hysterical intensity.

"Roddy, listen to me. This is my last appeal. Be merciful. Give me my freedom. Listen—only listen. I am very unhappy—about Gladys, too, as well as myself. The doctors say there's something wrong with her. I don't know—I pray not—if I think of it I feel I'm going mad. I don't know if it's my fault or your fault. I thought it was your fault—but I won't think it if you'll let me go. I want to be safe with her where I can take care of her. Roddy, have mercy on us—your poor little child and me. Have mercy and let us go."

He looked at her blankly. Her face was streaming with

tears, her features were twitching in a paroxysm of prayer and entreaty.

"Roddy, dear, be kind—be generous. We belong to you. We're so utterly in your power. If you'll only think. What harm have I ever done you? Why should you go on torturing me? You don't want me any longer. You have your other women—you, you can't want me. Let me go. I'll think kindly of you again—forget everything—when you've set me free. Let me get a judicial separation—don't oppose it, help me to get free. A deed is no use. I must feel *safe*—or Roddy, I shall go mad.

"I'll give you the money. Half of all that is left. Not for this speculation. But I'll settle it on you—so that you may always have something and I shall know you can't starve. Collies can arrange that;—provided we are separated by law. Then I'll be able to work and earn money. I won't be afraid of having to work for Gladys. I—I shall have no more fears—when she and I are alone.

But it was all without avail. That he felt contrition, perhaps even shame, was evident; for he spoke to her quite gently. Yet though soft of voice he was obdurate in purpose.

"Don't go on in this abject way. It gets on my nerves;" and he held her with his arm round her waist. "To see you crying and howling, one would think—There, I can't reopen all that talk of separation. I told you it's not to be thought of."

He went into the bedroom, and presently came out again in his shirt sleeves.

"Now the kid's crying. Quiet her down, and bring me out my coat. Claire, I'm sorry about the money." He muttered this, as if to himself. "On my honour, I'm sorry, but I don't see that I can give up the chance now. If it's any comfort to you, you are taking all my pleasure

out of it. If I listened to you, you'd make me feel like a common thief—and just when I was getting back my hope of pulling things right for both of us."

Then soon he went out again, saying that he would return early to-night, anyhow, by ten-thirty at latest.

"Get yourself some grub, Claire. And try to cheer up. Let bygones be bygones. It absolutely upset me, what you said about not wanting you. Of course I'm as fond of you as ever—only I've been so damnably down on my luck. You must make excuses if I give you the rough side of my tongue sometimes."

Claire stood listening and thinking. It was about eight o'clock now; she had at least two hours to herself before his return.

Next minute she had pulled out her boxes, was opening wardrobe drawers and throwing garments on the floor.

"It's all right, Gladys, darling. Mummy is packing up, and Gladys must help her by being very quiet and good. Soon she must get up again and be dressed. Fun, Gladys, isn't it, to do things like this at night?"

Her luggage was reduced to manageable size nowadays, and packing was a much easier task than in the far-off times, when Pope took half a day to fill those huge trunks that used to stand in the corridor of the Piccadilly Hotel.

In an hour all was ready, and Gladys fully dressed sat upon one of the boxes and promised to be very patient while her mother ran down into the Marylebone Road to hunt for a taxi-cab. It was half an hour before Claire came upon an empty cab, and then to her despair, the offered job was refused. Then after another ten minutes a policeman outside the Great Central Railway Station proved a friend in need, and a little before ten o'clock she was back at the flat and helping her cabdriver to carry the boxes down the steep stairs.

In feverish haste she had scribbled a note for Roddy,

and put it in a conspicuous position on the mantelshelf between the matches and one of his pipes.

"I have gone, and you will never see me again. Please apply to Messrs. Collie for your weekly money. I shall not tell them or anyone else where I have gone to. Good-bye. CLAIRE."

Thus, for the second time in her life, Claire ran away from home.

She drove first to her old lodgings near the Edgware Road; but Mrs. Morris had the house full and could not take them in. On Mrs. Morris's recommendation she went to a Mrs. Hume at Maida Vale. Mrs. Hume was sorry not to be able to oblige a friend of Mrs. Morris, and she gave Claire two likely addresses at Camden Town —"good, nice rooms, and respectable houses both of them, very particular. Mention my name." And at the second of these addresses Claire found a shelter and a resting-place. Mrs. Grove, the landlady, accepted the introduction of Mrs. Hume in spite of the suspiciously late hour. "I am very particular, I am," she said confidentially, as she led Claire and Gladys upwards to her top story. "Such times as we're living through. Young man and young woman scrape acquaintance at a theatre and come straight to me to take lodgings, without so much as a bandbox for luggage between them. I ask you! But you have your luggage, and the young lady is another testimonial."

Mrs. Grove's accommodation was all that Claire desired —a small front sitting-room, a bedroom opening out of it, and at the back of the bedroom a large alcove with another bed in it, the very thing for Gladys.

Soon the cabdriver, unaided, had brought up the last box; and having done so he sat down in the front room and grinned at Claire affably.

"Now I'm wondering what I'm to be paid for this stunt. Funny little game I bin helpin' you to play to-night, haven't I? As far as I can see, I shall be asked a nice lot of questions about it before I'm done."

Compared with the typical blackguards who drove cabs at this late period of the war, he was quite a pleasant good-natured fellow. He had no idea of turning profiteer; he only wanted to take advantage of the ordinary opportunities afforded by his profession.

Claire gave him a one-pound note for his labours and another in exchange for a promise that he would answer no questions, should any be asked.

Here in this small fastness under the tiles, in an obscure road of an outlying district, Claire lay comfortably hidden and felt almost safe. She would have felt safer if she had been able to conceal her name, but that had been impossible. Her fellow lodgers knew her as Mrs. Vaughan, and spoke to her, some of them, as she passed them on the stairs when going out for cautious walks with Gladys; but they were not the sort of people to wonder who she was or waste their time in trying to discover her previous history.

On the floor below there was an officer apparently honeymooning with a tall girl, who had very yellow hair and very high heels. They possessed a gramophone whose varied music throbbed through the house at all hours; and they entertained hospitably of an evening, collecting other light-hearted people to enjoy the gramophone, play cards, and even to dance. Below this couple, there were two elderly ladies who objected to the honeymooners' parties, and a big sombre man who did not mind. He was a worker at a neighbouring Y.M.C.A. hostel, and when he came back to his room he was so tired that nothing disturbed his sleep.

Claire intended to stay during the week for which she

had taken her rooms and then go away to the depths of the country or to a seaside town. She could not decide which would be safer.

Quite late in the evening, her landlady used to come up uninvited and sit with her for a little while, plaintively philosophizing. She was a kindly soul, and the notion of Claire's being lonely seemed to prey upon her mind. "You don't get much enjoyment out of life, not for your age," she said reflectively. "But then you're wrapped up in your little girl, aren't you? Anxious about her, too. She looks but poorly."

One night when she paid her visit Claire was already going to bed. But she tapped softly at the door of the bedroom and asked permission to come in and sit there.

"Don't take any notice of me. Go on brushing your hair, and let me talk. I didn't like not to see you after all this long day. Missie's all right in there—likes her bed? I shan't rouse her. I'm never a loud talker. I'm not intruding, am I?"

"Oh, no," said Claire. Indeed, companionship of this strange kind was now not unpleasant to her.

"What pretty hair you've got—and how you do keep brushing it. Like to feel it's all had the bristles through it? You aren't one of the bird's-nest sort. It's wigs mostly nowadays, or on the frame—and *dye*. I ask you! I could see you were a lady by the sound of your voice as soon as ever you spoke to me. And you've been through better times in your time, I know that. What times we're going through now. I don't care when the war ends, not me. It's all artificial, the good trade and the high prices. I'd sooner be back at the old level. Robbing Peter to pay Paul—that's about what it is. What you put into one pocket, the Government takes out of your other pocket. And the taxes! I ask you!"

Then another night when Claire was undressing, she heard footsteps and the sound of a match being struck to

light the gas. Next moment came soft taps on the door panels; and she unlocked and opened the door at once, saying, "Is that you, Mrs. Grove? Come in."

But it was not Mrs. Grove to-night. It was Roddy.

He had traced the fugitives with the greatest ease, and at his leisure. It occurred to him that in her essential ignorance of London, Claire would naturally drift towards the only places where she had lived before, and his first call of inquiry was at the lodgings by the Edgware Road.

He drew her towards him from the doorway, and looked at her dully and heavily.

"I am not going to argue with you to-night, Claire. I am too tired. We'll have it all out in the morning. I want to get to bed now. Stand out of the light and let me take in this kit-bag."

"Roddy, you must go away. You can't sleep here."

"Rot. Where else am I to sleep? I have shut up the flat, and given 'em the key. Don't play the fool."

"In—any—case, you couldn't, because Gladys is in there—the same room—only a curtain between. It—it wouldn't be decent." She was barring the way, and he tried to push her aside while she talked to him in a gasping whisper. "But apart from that, it's over—all done with between you and me. Nothing on earth would make me begin again."

Then quietly, with not the least unnecessary violence, he seized her bodily, with one hand on her bare white neck, and the other behind her back, gripping a naked arm; and she fought with him, physically this time, as he drove her backwards to the open door.

"No, I won't. I won't. Let me go. Don't you see that I'd rather kill myself? Don't you feel that I hate you and loathe you—that the touch of your hands sickens me. Roddy, I'll scream out if you don't stop! Roddy!"

She stretched her free arm towards the lintel of the door, tried to cling to it as he pushed her across

the threshold. Then suddenly she cried aloud for help.

"Hush—damn you. Are you mad?"

He put his hand over her mouth, but she wrenched her head away, and in the struggle the buttons on his coat sleeve cut her lip. Then, nonplussed by her ferocity, or hoping to keep her quiet by doing so, he let her go. And she ran out to the landing and halfway down the stairs, calling for help again.

The first people up the stairs were the young soldier and the yellow-haired girl from the first floor, but they were quickly followed by the other young folk that composed their evening party. The two elderly ladies came up next; and last of all the landlady with the Y.M.C.A. worker. She had been into his room to wake him. Claire retreated before them into the sitting-room, and they filled the landing, looking into the room as if it had been a scene on the stage.

Indeed it was a curious scene: Claire half dressed, her hair all tumbled loose seeming black against her white face, the red trickle of blood from the cut lip staining the whiteness of chin and bosom; Gladys in her night-dress sobbing with arms round her mother; and Roddy seated on the end of the horse-hair sofa with his hands in his pockets, looking moodily at the unopened kit-bag.

"Well, what the devil do you all want?" he asked, in a dull unemotional tone. "Look here, my wife and I have had a bit of a dispute, but it's all right. Just leave us alone."

"This man is my husband," said Claire; "but he has no right here. I have ordered him to go—and, and he still tries to stay."

"Yes, and he's been knocking her about, too," said the yellow-haired girl. "That's a dirty shame, anyhow."

"She's answered him," said another girl, "and he's given her a back-hander across the mouth. Why doesn't somebody send for the police?"

"Don't you ever do that, certainly not," said the landlady.

"If he was an officer," said the young married man, "I should know what to do with him. I should put him under arrest."

"I am an officer," said Roddy wearily.

"I don't believe you. If I did believe you, I should tell you to consider yourself under arrest."

"You leave him alone, Tony, or he'll assault you next."

And as usual on such occasions all talked at the same time.

"She wants him outside, she says so. Let's go for the blighter and pitch him out." . . . "I thought this was a respectable house. Such doings and noise when one wants to be quiet in one's bed." . . . "That's enough of it. You can all go to the devil." . . . "Comes in and tells my girl he's expected, pushes by her, and straight up the stairs with his bag in his hand, and makes this shindy. I ask you!"

Finally the big sombre man from the Y.M.C.A. hut took control of the situation, and persuaded all to descend again except himself and the landlady. He said this sort of disturbance was in his line, and he always acted on the maxim of doing the best in the circumstances.

The best in these particular circumstances, both to his judgment and that of Mrs. Grove, was to accept Roddy's word of honour as a gentleman not to interfere any more with Claire and her daughter, to see them both safely locked in the bedroom, to allow Roddy to sleep on the sofa, and, as a last touch of genuine Y.M.C.A. kindness, to supply two blankets from downstairs.

In the morning Roddy went out to wash at a public lavatory, came back to breakfast, and after breakfast he and Claire had the talk that he had spoken of last night.

"You might have waited, Claire. You might have given me a chance. I am going to relieve you of my presence

for six months anyhow. I've wanted to get across to the States for ages, and I'm going now—whatever happens. Claire, don't be hard on me. I'm pretty near down and out."

And he spoke of the offer she had made him of half her remaining capital. He said it was a sporting offer, and he would accept it if she would abandon the settlement plan and let him have it in cash. If she consented to this, he would solemnly undertake never to molest her again—not only at the end of six months, but never. He would go out of her life absolutely and for all time.

Claire consented, making such conditions as were necessary. She must have the assurance that he had really left England; and to this end, no money would be given to him until he was actually on the ship at Liverpool, and then only a little. The bulk of the money would be placed to his credit in New York, and he would have to go there to get it. He was to telegraph to her from the ship itself at the moment of departure, since it was unlikely that the authorities would sanction his sending a wireless message to her from the high seas.

"Done! You don't trust me; but I mustn't complain;" and he looked at her sadly and doubtfully. "When you were so riled with me last night, you said things that I shouldn't like to think you meant—about the touch of my hands and all that. You didn't really mean it, Claire?"

"Roddy, how do I know what I said—or what you made me say?"

"But you don't take it back?" And he looked at her searchingly and wonderingly. "Does it mean that you've turned against me so utterly as all that? But it's very sudden, isn't it? All right. We've made our bargain. But answer this one question. Does it mean that you have found somebody else? . . . Ah, that's brought the colour to your cheeks. You can't answer me, what?"

"A last insult, Roddy. But what does it matter? Why should I feel either indignation or surprise? You shall have your answer. No, there is nobody else, and there never will be."

Then he asked her to kiss him.

"No."

"Then ta-ta. Good luck." And he shrugged his shoulders, picked up his bag, and went down the stairs.

A few days later she received the telegram for which she had stipulated. "Good-bye.—RODDY."

He had gone.

CHAPTER XXII

THE cruel time was over: he had really gone. Claire, physically and mentally exhausted, took her little girl far away from the vast ugliness of London, and they stayed for long peaceful weeks in a cottage on the shore of one of the river estuaries of South Devon.

Here one could forget the war and all other violences in looking at things that they had never touched—white-headed old fishermen mending nets on the cobble stones by the little pier, the curved flight of seagulls traced against a blue sky, the broad face of red fields that grew sad only because clouds were passing and smiled all day when the sky was clear. Gladys was happy and well in this soft bland climate. The people were Devonshire people, and that is but another way of saying that they were kind and good people. Claire was at peace. She slept without nightmare dreams; she woke without any dread of the dawning day.

She felt weary and weak; but gradually that marvellous medicine, the tyrant's absence, gave tone to her nerves and richness to her blood. Her youth was asserting itself. Her appetite returned, her footsteps grew lighter and yet firmer; she was rapidly getting strong. All round them the signs of advancing spring gave their sweet messages of life and hope; nature, calmly triumphant, was unfolding its yearly lesson. There is no death, no destruction, only change. Gladys enjoyed the epoch-marking adventures of childhood; saw a cow milked, heard the blackbird's pipe and the woodpecker's drill, sought through the banks of deep-set lanes, with unsnobbish ardour, to meet her first Lords and Ladies. When she and her mother laughed there was no fear of the sound

causing offence. Sometimes, forgetful of the proverb, they sang as they dressed before breakfast.

Then came the news of reverses to our armies in France, news so big with danger to the great cause that they shook one, no matter how far one had crept from the noisy centre of things. Claire in her peaceful retreat was agitated by the sombre tidings of these heavy days; but this, too, was good for her, breaking the dull chain of habit which binds even the most unselfish people and compels them to think only of themselves when for a long time they have borne a ceaseless discomfort. Claire was lifted out of herself, and felt again the wider thought-tension of the world.

But the fishermen daubing their mended nets, said that things would come all right at long last; the red fields were changing to green, pierced by millions of tiny spears; dark clouds came billowing overhead; then a shaft of sunlight leaped down upon the water, and the flashing bow of promise lay stretched across the sky.

Claire came back to London in the early summer; and it seemed as if fate, tired of tormenting her, was now pleased to accept her as its most favoured child. Everybody was kind to her; everything went well with her. Astounding lucky chances helped in all that she tried to do. For instance, when she went to see if she could get rooms at Mrs. Morris's house, lodgers unexpectedly called away had just vacated the very rooms that suited in cost and arrangement. Mrs. Morris said it was little short of a miracle. The rooms had been only empty an hour, and they would most certainly have been snapped up before nightfall.

Claire was extremely grateful for the lucky chance, because she had some happy memories of this house as well as sad ones. And another surprisingly good turn of luck—a larger miracle! You could now get real hot water.

"No one more surprised than myself," said Mrs. Morris. "Without a word of warning the landlord sends them in to fix a new range and a fresh system. I can only suppose he's made his fortune by now, same as everybody else except me."

Then Pope, her sometime maid, came back to her. Pope was Mrs. Dent now, a wife of six years' standing, with a husband fighting in the war, but she begged Claire still to call her by her maiden name. She had lost a baby son, and she wept when she spoke of him, but out of her disappointment and grief had come a great love of children, other people's children if she might not have any of her own, and she proved an invaluable friend and guardian to Gladys. Indeed, she was altogether a softened and more yielding Pope than the resilient tightly-laced young woman of the past; she expressed an affection for her late mistress which she had always felt but had not been always able to show, and between them there was a preliminary contest of generosity and good feeling before the terms of the new engagement were settled. Claire wanted Pope, but could not afford her; and Pope insisted on giving her services without payment. She had her separation allowance, and with bed and board provided, she declared that she would be in clover until her man came home. So insistent was she that scruples were overcome; and Claire, determined to make it up to Pope somehow, expressed a very real gratitude and drew a great comfort from the presence of this faithful servant, the sight of whose familiar face reminded her of long-gone days and made her feel younger and happier every time she met its smiles.

The smiles were always there after Pope had eased her conscience by a very tearful confession. No effort of Claire's could stop her when she began to explain how and why she had first deserted her mistress. It was the master's cruel pestering that had compelled her to depart from Sedgmoor Street so obdurately, when the kindest of

mistresses was lying ill in bed. And Pope went on to bewail her fault in having taken money from Roddy as a bribe to abet him in his clandestine courtship of her innocent young lady.

"It wasn't a lot of money, ma'am; and at the time I swear to heaven I thought I was helping things all for the best. I was fairly took in by him, though more than old enough to see through such a sham. But afterwards I could have cut my hand off with shame and sorrow when I witnessed the sequel, and had to watch how he acted towards you. . . . No, ma'am, I won't speak of it again, never. Only I *had* to tell you and ask for your forgiveness."

Claire said there was nothing to forgive; nothing done by Pope had made any difference, and Pope was to banish this old story from her mind. Then Pope, feeling shrived, was able to smile steadily as she bustled about her tasks.

In the morning Claire used to work with Gladys at her lessons, pleased if her little girl showed the slightest progress, resolutely shutting her eyes to any signs which might suggest that the pupil was less capable of learning than a normal child of the same age; and for the rest of the day she could treat time as her own, if she cared to leave Gladys in charge of the admirable Pope. She knew that she could do so safely. She began then to look about for employment in order to earn a little money. But soon she made the discovery that, ridiculously small as her means were, they were more than sufficient. She had amassed large savings in Devonshire, and here in London these savings remained intact. Notwithstanding the comparatively high rent paid to Mrs. Morris for her smallest and least desirable rooms, in spite of the superlatively high cost of food, raiment, and every other necessity, these two women and the child were able to live comfortably and well on a veritable pittance. The explanation was simple enough. The vast insatiable male appetite had

been eliminated from the domestic problem. Hundreds of thousands of women had made and were making Claire's discovery.

With no dark thought for the household books, content in the hour, heedless of to-morrow, Claire walked with light footfall through the long summer days. The weight was lifted from her shoulders, she could carry her head high and dream of noble things. She thought almost continuously of the war—the titanic struggle, the fight between the powers of light and darkness, that she had almost forgotten while locked in the prison-house of personal woes. Surely the righteous cause must triumph. However dark the immediate prospect, the end must come in a burst of dazzling light. God would not permit this deluge of blood to continue indefinitely: His bow was in the sky.

Indeed, already there was more hopeful talk on the lips of men. The enemy had made their last tremendous thrust and failed. Amiens was not to fall; the open road to Paris had been closed once more with a gate of fire.

Claire was working for Aunt Agnes at a women's guild, and now she again wore her Red Cross uniform and went on two or three afternoons in the week to Lady Pevensea's hospital in Arlington Street.

One saw the war here under its gentlest and most aristocratic aspect. The grand house, stripped bare except for the magnificent pictures and here and there a piece of furniture, had preserved its essential stateliness; the metal beds stood widely spaced along the parquetry floor of the great reception rooms, and through windows so tall that they seemed narrow one looked out on the trees and the grass of the park.

Her bed—or rather Miss Verinder's bed—was at the end of the dining-room, on the ground floor, and Claire's task was to attend to its occupant when Miss Verinder went

out of an afternoon for her prescribed exercise and fresh air. The occupant of the bed now was a new arrival, a Colonel Basil Everett who had been rather badly gassed. That first afternoon he was sleeping when Claire came on duty.

"Is he blinded?" she whispered.

"Oh, no," said Miss Verinder cheerfully, "but they'll have to keep the light from his eyes for some time. He'll be quite all right, they say. Greatly distinguished himself, it seems. Done grandly." She was a jolly, capable sort of girl, and she gave Claire directions in a business-like manner, eager for her walk. "Talk to him. It'll do him good. If he complains of pain in his eyes, drench the under bandage with this."

Claire looked at some books on the small table by the bed and saw that her beloved Thackeray was represented among their authors! then she sat down and watched the sleeper.

He was a man of about thirty-five, tall and thin, and he lay on his back motionless with hands folded on his breast. He was clean-shaven, and the bandage allowed one to see that he had a broad, intellectual forehead and a long, high-bridged nose. His mouth was fine, unsensual; and Claire noticed a tremor on the lips from time to time that meant pain or the memory of pain.

Then all at once he woke, and Claire asked if he would like her to read to him. He did not want to be read to, but he seemed to enjoy talking and they were soon launched in a discussion about books. His voice was a little husky, and yet one felt the natural pleasantness of its tone. He had the frank abruptness which is common to men who are quite sure of their position in the world, and which sounds to a stranger almost gracious sometimes because it implies at once confidence and equality. But he shocked Claire by speaking ill of Thackeray; saying he was an

old twaddler, and forcing her to defend the characters in *The Newcomes* one by one.

However, they agreed better on other points, and it was altogether an entertaining conversation; so much so that the time passed very easily.

She was interested in him, and a few days later she heard more about him. An elderly cousin of his had come to see him, and this lady took an opportunity of thanking Claire for her kindness.

"You have no idea how much he appreciates it. He finds in you what is so rare nowadays, someone who can understand what he calls the realm of thought. He is very clever, you know." And she continued to sing her cousin's praises; telling Claire that he belonged to the Foreign Office, that famous statesmen thought highly of him, as certain to make a big career. "Directly the war broke out he threw over everything at once. Of course, he could not do otherwise; and yet——" She sighed, and left the sentence unfinished. "And he has done so splendidly out there." She sighed again. "He will go out directly they let him. He longs to be back. I hope he may win through."

The following afternoon Colonel Everett greeted Claire quite excitedly.

"I have made an astounding discovery since yesterday. You are Mrs. Vaughan. When they said that, it meant nothing to me; but you are the Mrs. Vaughan who was Miss Gilmour."

"Yes."

"Then, Mrs. Vaughan, I am an old friend and not a stranger. I have been at your house. Don't you remember me—Basil Everett? I talked to you a lot at an evening party."

Claire was obliged to confess that she did not remember.

"How humiliating! Not even heard me spoken of by

your relations? Mrs. Vaughan, I was at your wedding. And what's more, I gave you a wedding present."

"You make me ashamed."

"You wrote me a charming letter of thanks, and said you liked the little books—two volumes of Tennyson—*Maud* and *Enoch Arden*."

"Oh, I *am* so glad." And Claire explained that by circumstances over which she had no control nearly all her wedding presents had disappeared. "We were obliged to send them to a warehouse—and then—— Anyhow, I kept those two books—my favourite poet—and in that lovely binding; and I have them still quite safe. You know, Colonel Everett, you didn't write your name in them. You ought to have."

"I will now."

"I'll bring them to-morrow."

It all seemed to her mysterious, wonderful, and very, very pleasant. He was really and truly an old friend. And those books! What a strange and happy chance that she had not lost them.

They talked that afternoon about her family.

"The wedding—what an immense time ago," he said musingly. "How long?"

"Nine years."

"But still you *are* very young. You were only a child then."

"I am nearly thirty."

"Your sister—Mrs. Joyce! She used to snub me horribly. That nice aunt of yours, Miss Graham, introduced me to you all. She has always been extraordinarily kind to me."

"She is kind to everybody," said Claire.

"Joyce, your brother-in-law! A barrister, wasn't he?"

"No, he's a solicitor. He has been knighted."

"Knighted! How on earth did he put his foot in it and let such a thing as that happen?"

Claire laughed. "If Emily heard you speak like that she would be very angry. She is very proud and pleased about it."

"Have any other members of the family got into trouble?"

Claire, laughing, said yes, her brother John had been made a baronet; but that was always expected.

"So it didn't come as a blow? And that nice old chap, *le père noble*, who gave you away?"

"Uncle Derek! Oh, he's very well," and she told how he had been a special constable from the beginning of the war, out in all weathers and never complaining, although over seventy.

"They'll knight him too, if he isn't careful," said Colonel Everett.

She talked with absolute freedom, in sympathy with him, trusting him instinctively and fully. She felt the pleasure of a freedom that she had not enjoyed for all these long years. In all her married life there had not been one friend of Roddy's with whom she could laugh and talk like this, without constraint, on a perfect equality of sentiment, confidently and at ease. To use the brutal word, there had not been one gentleman.

Colonel Everett sent his love to Miss Graham, and wanted to see her. But she was out of London for a few days. Claire, however, promised to write to her. And one afternoon Aunt Agnes made her appearance at the hospital.

Afterwards she praised Basil Everett more enthusiastically even than his own cousin. She had known him since he was a boy, and had always admired him; "even had dreams about him at one time, Claire—I mean, ideas of how his life might be arranged for him." He belonged to an old family, and had no brother, but one sister, to whom he had been so greatly devoted that soon after coming of age he gave her his estate and nearly all his money,

keeping only a small farm for himself. "People don't do things like that unless they are a little out of the common run, do they, Claire?" The sister was married and ungrateful. But when he spoke of her no one would guess. "Has she been to see him, Claire?"

"No, I don't think so."

"A selfish cat," said Miss Graham.

At this period an epidemic of marriage had broken out among the amiable and attractive young nurses collected by Lady Pevensea, and during a little while the hospital for the first time in its history found itself short-handed. Miss Verinder escaped the contagion, but she was promoted temporarily to higher office; thus the chance came to Claire of being really useful. For a whole week she received regular employment, working from midday to midnight; and then, through no fault of their own, but owing to the return of several of the newly-wed, Miss Verinder was reduced in rank again and Claire fell back to her position of visiting assistant.

Colonel Everett chaffingly complained that she had neglected him during this time of stress, although, in fact, she had given him as much attention as was possible; and he welcomed her renewed leisure as propitious to his convalescence. "Of course," he said, "the better I get, the duller I feel."

He was doing remarkably well. That huskiness had gone from his voice; soon a green shade would take the place of the bandages, and he would be allowed to use his eyes a little every day.

He used to talk about the sensations of blind men and the sharpening of the other senses that are supposed to result from the loss of sight. "I think that must be bosh," he said. "I haven't developed any Sherlock Holmes faculties." And smilingly he added that he almost dreaded seeing Claire again, lest he should find her greatly changed.

"I remember you so well. You had dark hair, and dark eyes. Now you'll want to murder me when I tell you this. Before I knew who you were—at the very beginning—I thought you were quite young, absurdly young. I built up the picture of somebody, well, quite different from what you are; a rather dumpy little person with fair, even sandy hair, freckles—and eye-glasses. Mrs. Vaughan, I was sure you had eye-glasses. But, good gracious, after all, have you?"

"No," said Claire, with her pretty, low-toned laugh sounding exactly as it used to do at Hague House. "How dreadfully silly you are about it!"

"That's all right. I breathe again. Of course, I should have heard the glasses falling with a click against your belt."

Why was it that he could say these things, implying some memory of good looks, of something about her worthy of admiration, and yet neither embarrass her nor make her in the least angry? It was because of the perfectly frank tone, the lightness and yet the solid weight that are at once the attributes of friendship. She thought of knock-down compliments dealt her by some of Roddy's pals, and of her disgust and annoyance as she evaded any opening for further assaults.

"Do tell me about your daughter," said Basil Everett. "Is she like you?"

"No, I don't think so," and there was sudden sadness in Claire's tone. "They say she is like a sister of mine—who died." It had always made her wince when her mother and Emily harped on this fancied resemblance, saying: "She is more and more like poor Angela."

"I hope," said Everett, "that you'll let me make the acquaintance of Miss Claire."

"Her name is not Claire. We called her Gladys."

"Oh, what a pity! Why was that? Claire is such an awfully pretty name."

"I had a superstitious fancy that it wasn't a lucky one."

"Oh, that was the reason."

And she felt certain that he understood as clearly as if she had said: "My married life was not a happy one." In his brief silence he conveyed to her a sympathy more regretful and sincere than if he had openly expressed commiseration. He could never have heard anything about her troubles, she had had no intention of hinting at them, but she was glad that he knew the truth.

At last the time came when the bandage was removed, and he peeped at a brilliantly illuminated universe from beneath a large green shade. "I have had it right off for five minutes this morning," he told her gaily; "and I never saw better in my life. I may have it off for another two minutes this afternoon. I can see you now, you know. You are taller than I remembered." And presently he raised himself in bed, and said that he would have the two minutes without any further delay. "It's no good hoarding it up. They may give me another two, if I spend these promptly."

"You are sure it's all right? Don't look towards the window."

"No, I want to look at you."

He had pushed the shade up above his forehead, and his rather deep-set eyes examined her with a grave scrutiny. She, too, was studying attentively, never till now having known the natural aspect of his face. Only his mouth had been really familiar to her. He seemed stronger, more serious and reserved than she had imagined.

"Well," she asked, "am I very different from what you remembered?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her gravely and kindly; "very much indeed."

She smiled back at him, without the least self-consciousness.

"Of course you were a girl, and now you are a woman. I can only think of that extremely hackneyed phrase: Something has gone from you, and something has been given to you. But let me hasten to add that you have gained on balance."

She stood with his watch in her hand counting the seconds—while he went on talking, about the room and a picture at the far end over one of the marble chimney-pieces.

"Five more seconds," said Claire. . . . "Now."

And he covered his eyes, and lay down again.

"Has it made your eyes ache?"

"Not a bit. Oh, if they'd only let me get up, I should be as right as rain. My chest is absolutely clear. I think it's old-womanish nonsense keeping me here when I ought to be out and getting fit as fast as I can."

"They'll soon let you go out now. Miss Verinder said so."

She always remembered that afternoon, because it was the one on which he talked to her about the war. She had asked him if he ever doubted.

"*You* never doubt, either," he said. "No, I am sure you don't."

And he went on to speak of the certainty of victory, and the wonderful work to be done in the reconstruction of the world after the war. He said how at this time one felt that only the future of our race counted, and that the fate of the individual was nothing. He said it was dreadful to hear politicians still urging people to forget themselves and do their duty in the cause of humanity, because truly there was no need, there never had been any need, for such goading eloquence. One might try to think of oneself, one's own small griefs or cares, but one could not do it. One lost oneself in the colossal agony, the supreme hope.

"Mrs. Vaughan, you know what I mean, though I say it so feebly. It is wonderful to live in such a period—or to die in it either. You know that thing of Julia Ward

Howe's. I always think of one line. 'He hath sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.' The men themselves feel it—they can't help feeling it. They are lifted out of themselves—they are marching to the glory, and they are content, though it is a glory they may never see."

And Claire, sitting by the open window and listening, felt that she, too, was content, no matter what happened to her. He talked in his usual quiet voice, without any effort after rhetoric, not choosing words or trying to give them emphasis, but with intense conviction, and the words moved her to her depths.

"What work to do—what work for every living man and woman on the earth!" And he spoke again of the fresh clean world to be built up from the blood-stained ruins of the world that had gone.

Claire, with her back to the quiet, peaceful room, looked out of the window, at the open park, men and women and children sauntering along the paths, the dipping line of trees with the white houses of Piccadilly seen here and there above their topmost branches; and even this common town was beautiful in the glory of the warm summer light. She felt that she was looking at the beauty of the world which nothing can destroy, and that her heart was beating calmly to the rhythm of eternal hopes. Westward across the stretch of grass the people in the far distance seemed to be hurrying towards a golden haze—the vision of splendour and victory.

She had been lifted out of herself. She thought, "This is how one ought to feel; these things are what I have craved to hear said." If she never saw him again, she would be grateful to him for putting into plain words the highest and finest thoughts of the passing hour.

Going home, she wondered if he had done it with a purpose—especially all that he had said about the insignificance of the individual—in order to help her.

CHAPTER XXIII

THIS friendship continued after he left the hospital, and they met often at Aunt Agnes's house in Hans Place. One day they all went to tea with him at his rooms in a new block of buildings near St. James's Square. He was delightfully kind to little Gladys, and he astounded his older visitors by the amount of sugar and sugary cakes that, despite of severe food regulations, he had somehow contrived to obtain. It was a gay and happy party.

He had been before a medical board; soon he would go before another, and in this vacant time of unemployment he put himself at the service of Miss Graham and Claire. For a week or ten days he had a motor-car at his disposal, and he took them for some pleasant drives; after that he was always inventing little treats or amusements which Claire, no longer wanted by the hospital, greatly enjoyed; when they refused an excursion, he offered to fetch or carry for them, to make himself useful to them in any possible way.

Aunt Agnes raved about his unselfishness. She said he had strayed among them from another century; he was a knight errant, a very perfect knight indeed. "I mean it, Claire. If all men were like him, I should have no quarrel with the sex. But it is the exception that proves the rule."

Claire, naturally comparing him with other men and allowing for characteristic exaggeration, found him almost all that her aunt said. She was touched by his unfailing kindness to Gladys. He had insisted that Gladys should be taken with them for those expeditions, and the child had given her small heart to him completely. Claire felt strong indignation when she thought of that callous, un-

grateful sister who had accepted so much and given nothing in exchange.

She was surprised that such a man should seem now so friendless and alone; she could not believe that his time was so little mortgaged to the claims of others as to make him really free to waste it without limit on Aunt Agnes and herself; but he said always that he had nothing else to do and no one else that he wanted to see. He told her in effect that his friends were few, but very dear to him. The men of whom he was fond were all on active service. He hated his clubs. He was quite at a loose end.

He knew the Bedminsters, and went with Miss Graham and her niece to the wedding of Cyril. It was a solemn and rather austere gathering at St. Margaret's, Westminster; the intimate friends of both families did not fill a quarter of the big church; and as there were no formings up of soldiers at the door, no excesses of floral decoration, no inviting paths of red cloth to attract public notice, very few wanderers came in from the streets.

Cyril had developed in body as well as mind during the war; he looked very big round the chest as he stood stiffly to attention; his expression was proud and staid, while the loftiness of his changed views, the disregard of all the pretty toys of life, was well exemplified by a total absence of care as to what happened to his new red hat with its shining gold lace and black peak. Abandoned as a bauble, it rolled and faintly clattered on the stone pavement. But Cyril did not move a muscle or blink an eye.

"*Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony?*"

Claire, kneeling while others stood, listened to the portentous words, and prayed that Cyril might be happy with his serious lady.

There was no reception, because of the war; the high-

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BETTER FOR WORSE

and biscuits in
party, the guests
there an informal assem-
her, loud and jovial, ac-
compliments on her elevation to
"Well," said Emily, "it is a recog-
has done. That's why I value it."
frock-coat and white waistcoat, was
old-fashioned nobles to the Gilmour
our, very grand, placid, and absent-
the throng and sent people on errands
that she had left in the front pew and
that she fancied she had dropped in the vestry.
she said, "I am glad to see you, but Roddy
have been here, too. He should have come back
America on purpose, if necessary," and she became
"Claire, I do not like this long absence of his;
what is more, I do not understand it."

It was immediately after this apotheosis of her adored Cyril that poor Mrs. Gilmour suffered from one of those mishaps to which she had been peculiarly subject all her life. The news ran round the family that mother's leasehold houses had been demolished during the last air raid; and that owing to mother's forgetfulness, in spite of the most urgent warnings and entreaties from old Mr. Collie, she had omitted to insure the houses against war risks. Now the unlucky leaseholder would have to rebuild the whole of these tenements at her own charge and hand them over to the ground landlord all new and spic and span in two years from now. Of course, it was *wicked* of Mr. Collie, knowing what mother was, not to have insured the things himself on his own responsibility.

Mrs. Gilmour announced to the world that she would have to give up Hague House; and she wrote to Claire asking if she could have a bed-sitting-room at Mrs. Morris's lodgings; "for I am both homeless and ruined."

'ut it was not as bad as everybody anticipated. One learned that Mrs. Gilmour had misread one letter and pened another; and that a visit to the property had .vn that only the corner house had been destroyed. .ie blow was, so to speak, heavy, but by no means a .nock-out. Although still further crippled in her resources, Mrs. Gilmour would not be bereft of all visible means of subsistence. For the present, at least, she and Belton would remain at Hague House.

Claire, greatly relieved by a note from her mother cancelling her recent booking of apartments, felt very happy again. Indeed, at this time she was almost inexplicably happy. More and more, it seemed to her that hope was in the air; an unreasoned optimism now filled one's heart; sooner than experts dared predict peace was coming to a tortured world.

But then of a sudden she was shaken by a gust of grief. One morning she read in the newspaper of the accidental death of Evan Giles. He had fallen from a high cliff in Cornwall, and his mutilated body had been found by fishermen on the rocks below. There would be an inquest, although no one could doubt that the deceased had lost his life by an accident.

Claire sat staring at the newspaper and trembling. It seemed to her as if she had read the paragraph years ago, she knew its wording so well, or that the sad news itself was the fulfilment of an ugly dream. Then at once she knew that there had been no accident. She was again in that littered, dusty room; she could hear his voice, as he spoke of going quietly, without any loud song of *Nunc Dimittis*. But he had said that he did not mean it. He had said that when people talked like that they never meant it.

The evening papers had obituary notices, and as Claire read them she could hear his voice once more. Every phrase sounded as an echo. "Unaccountably surrendered

or let slip a prominent place in the world of letters. . . . Disappointed critics and readers alike by his failure to fulfil this early promise. . . . Almost forgotten by the novel-reading public." How pitifully true his forecast had been. How cruelly well he knew what they would say of him.

At the inquest, briefly reported two days later, the evidence supported the theory of a very usual kind of accident and rendered only one verdict possible. The deceased had nothing whatever on his mind. His daughter had been lately married with his full approval. His son had just secured a coveted decoration for gallantry in the field. The deceased had expressed great satisfaction at both of these auspicious events.

But Claire knew; and the sadness of it made her heart ache. She mourned for him with a genuine grief, and the sorrowful truth which she could not impart to others lay heavy in her thoughts.

It spoilt much of her pleasure in a second tea-party at Basil Everett's rooms. They had been looking forward to this treat so gaily; for their host said he was going to surpass himself in the way of cakes, and he had promised to show Claire some of his prints and original editions. Miss Graham declared that she loved going to this part of the town, because it was so entirely masculine and one saw there such monumental proof of men's selfish greed for luxury and their incompetence even to make themselves decently comfortable.

"These clubs and chambers, Claire, without a woman's shop visible. Isn't it all hideous and disgusting? I wonder Basil can consent to live among so much hatefulness."

They passed out of St. James's Square, round a corner, and into a narrow side street, in which the building they sought stood facing a restaurant and a hosier's. The echoing footsteps of a porter rang loud in the stone hall,

and he himself presently carried them aloft in a lift that had not even a bench to sit down on.

"Could anything be more inconvenient or worse arranged?" murmured Miss Graham, so sweetly that the porter thought she was thanking him.

"Don't mention it," he said. "The colonel warned me he was expecting ladies. 'Tis the door facing you at the end of the corridor."

Claire would have guessed that he was a soldier who had done his duty even if she had not noticed the two wound stripes on the sleeve of his apple-green coat, and she smiled at him kindly.

Everett's rooms were truly very comfortable, handsome too, in a certain style, and their tenant stoutly defended them against Miss Graham's damaging criticism. He said he had occupied them for many years, and nothing would ever make him desert them. The whole house, he further maintained, was admirably managed. There was a kitchen from which, if you wished, you could have a meal sent up to you at any hour and on the shortest notice; the house servants were attentive without being obtrusive; there was a tradesmen's entrance at the back, giving into another street, so you never saw any carts or errand boys at the front door.

"It isn't Hans Place," he said gaily; "but, short of that, I don't know what one could ask for more."

He showed them pictures and photographs of countries through which he had travelled on political missions, and then while he and Claire wandered round his bookshelves, Miss Graham and Gladys sat in the window seat and enjoyed the fascinating depth of view into the street.

Claire had not looked at many books before she began to talk to Everett of Evan Giles. He was sympathetic directly he heard that the dead man had been a friend of hers; but already there had been time for him to make a disparaging remark about the author's later work.

"Oh, don't say that. He was a great artist."

"Yes," he said cordially, "I do agree with you. Those first books were very fine. I know I have some of them here;" and he searched in one of the book-cases, came back to her, and put a copy of *Blind Purposes* into her hands.

She turned the pages with tender reverence, thinking of the diligent and weary hand that had stiffened and grown cold, and tears for a moment filled her eyes as she spoke again of the lost friend.

"He was so kind to me always. I am so sorry—so dreadfully sorry that he is gone."

The sunlight from the window, warm and bright and vivifying, lit up her face even in its sadness. The curve of her cheek was fuller now; the profile, no less delicate, had a greater dignity; her pose, graceful as ever, had the charm that comes from perfect health. As she stood there in the completeness of her slowly matured beauty, with the sunlight full upon her, Aunt Agnes thought that she was indeed a dazzlingly attractive woman.

"Yes, dear Gladys," said Miss Graham; "as you say, isn't it a very, very long way down there?"

Then again she looked back at the others, thinking now what a handsome couple they made standing there so tall and straight by the rows of old books. She thought of what one of them had said of the other years and years ago; how in his boyish enthusiasm he had vowed that she was different from other girls, finer and fairer, more like the girls that one sees only in one's dreams. When presently he came across to the tea-table, Miss Graham studied him with her shrewd old eyes, and felt convinced that he was pretty much of the same opinion now as then.

As if to bear out his vindication of the house, an excellent tea was brought up to them with the fruit and cakes and dainties that no one nowadays was allowed to buy.

"How is it done, Basil?"

"My dear Miss Graham, ask no questions. We benighted bachelors wave a wand or make a sign, and the enchanted banquet rises through the floor. Obviously it would be impossible if a housekeeper and six parlour-maids were running about and asking each other who had rung the bell, instead of doing anything."-

Again it was a pleasant meal. Aunt Agnes benignly sipped and munched. Gladys was hungry and joyful. Claire forgot her sadness and was glad.

They sat there talking contentedly till the child was overcome with sudden fatigue. Basil Everett was the first to notice this.

"Is enough as good as a feast, Gladys?" he asked gently. "I think she is tired, Mrs. Vaughan."

"Yes, I'm very, very tired," said the child.

More than anything else, it was Gladys that drew them nearer and nearer together. Claire was grateful to him because, having easily won the child's affection, he seemed to value it as something precious. His voice had a special tone when he spoke to the child, even when he was laughing and playing with her, a tone so gently protective that it stirred and thrilled in the mother's heart. But there was a look in his eyes, too, that Claire had observed once or twice; a look that, although she did not fathom it, gave her exquisite pain.

One August afternoon at the house in Hans Place, Aunt Agnes was taking Gladys out of the room to show her things upstairs, and he stood at the door as they went out. His eyes watched and followed the child. Then when he turned from the door Claire saw this look plainly, and understood it in the swift moment of its vanishing. It was pity.

Greatly moved, she said something to him.

Sitting down beside her again he talked to her, saying

things that she could scarcely bear, that she certainly would not have borne from anyone else.

"But, Mrs. Vaughan, this is only what you think yourself."

"Yes," she said, "it fills me with terrible fear. I *can't* think of it."

He put his hand on her arm, and she saw the look again—pity for herself now.

"But, Mrs. Vaughan, one must not fear. Fear is the one emotion that one must not allow; it paralyses, it makes one do selfish things. With those we love we often worry ourselves needlessly. But it is better to *know*. There might be things to be done—now—that won't allow of delay—for Gladys' sake."

And he talked to her of a specialist, not known to him personally, but of whom the doctors in France had spoken with the highest praise.

"I would like you to consult him. I could easily arrange it. My cousin would take you—or Miss Graham, of course. I would like to go with you myself, but perhaps——"

"If I went at all, I would like to go with you. But I think not yet." She was wringing her hands, and her voice grew weak. "I—I think he would only echo what other doctors have said."

"Very well. But if ever I could be of use, you would let me, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"You promise. You won't forget?"

"No, I have not so many friends to turn to that I should be likely to forget."

A few days after this he came to her lodgings and took her and Gladys out to luncheon. After luncheon he drove them back to the Marble Arch, and they sat on a bench in the park. It was a glorious dreamlike afternoon, with the light of full summer streaming through every crevice

in the heavy foliage of the trees. Gladys, dancing about upon the chequered surface of the path, soon grew tired and drowsy. She came back to them, to sit by Basil Everett, and fell asleep. He had put his arm round her and she slept on while they talked.

He told Claire that at last they had passed him as fit. He was going out in a week.

Claire listening thought of him as the perfect knight, as gentle as he was brave, as wise as good. And, listening, she grew sad. Now soon he would go away, and perhaps give his splendid life in all its purity and force as if it was a worn-out garment for which he had no further use. She thought: "The sun will shine; the cause will triumph; and perhaps our victory will be sung by millions of coarse voices while his kind voice is still. It will be as if he had never been—not only to me, but to others who know him so much better than I, who love him; for none who have the right could know him really well and yet not love him."

CHAPTER XXIV

THAT was the end of her good time. The shadow fell upon her, blotting out all the light.

On the morning after that walk and sleep in the sunny park Gladys complained of a violent headache. She felt sick and giddy, and by the evening her mother knew that she was really ill. Then, rapid and terrible, far worse than the onslaught of the pneumonia years ago, the illness announced itself as desperately grave. The doctor hastily summoned by Pope said he would at once send in a nurse, suggested a consultation, and without expressing a definite opinion, spoke of diseases the mere name of which seem heavy with the sound of doom—meningitis, cerebro-spinal fever, tubercular meningitis.

Claire rushed out to the post office and telephoned to Basil Everett calling for help. When she got back to the lodgings Miss Graham had already arrived, had told Mrs. Morris that money was no object, had taken possession of a sitting-room on the floor below Claire's rooms, and had ordered that a camp bedstead should be put into it. She had established herself, and she told Claire that she meant to stay. Soon then Basil Everett appeared. The man of whom he had spoken to Claire was at a hospital near Egham, but Everett had been able to get through to him on the telephone. He would be here in two hours. His name was Rice-Wilcox. And Everett went out again to inform the other doctor that the great man was coming.

Thus on the evening of this second day they waited for the words of fate—words to be spoken by the lips of a small, grey, insignificant-looking man, coming swiftly to them now through the pleasant summer night; two beams

of white radiance piercing the darkness of tree-shaded roads, as his car swept him along nearer and nearer; a throb, a vibration of mere mechanic power, with a human mind carried in its train; spinning wheels, lamp-light, two insects flying slowly under the measureless void, on the errand of a Destiny in whose sight things are neither great nor small because all things are indifferent.

Everett stood listening at the door of Miss Graham's sitting-room; the general practitioner sat at the table reading the newspaper; Miss Graham was coming down the stairs again. She said Pope was in the sick-room with Claire and the nurse. Mrs. Morris had taken up some more ice.

"Well, he ought to be here by now," said the doctor, laying down the paper. "No news of any importance to-night."

Miss Graham and Basil Everett both looked at him. News? What did he mean? For the moment the world-war was as nothing. Millions more men might die in it; but they wanted to hear now that one little child was to live.

"That's the car," said Everett, and he hurried downstairs to open the front door.

With scarce a word of preliminary politeness, they went straight upstairs to the top floor; Everett leading the way, the two doctors following. Mrs. Morris, on the top landing, tapped at the door of the sick-room and Pope came out, then Claire.

Her eyes seemed preternaturally large; her face had a withered whiteness.

"Nobody in the room with us, please, except the nurse," said Dr. Wilcox, with a quiet tone of authority.

But Claire suddenly clung to Everett as if for protection.

"Basil, don't let them keep me out of the room. I must be with her. When she comes to herself, she'll look for me —and be frightened if I'm not there."

"Colonel Vaughan," said Dr. Wilcox, in the same tone, "you had better take your wife downstairs. We may be some considerable time."

"Yes, dear Claire," said Miss Graham. "Come down and wait with me."

The doctors had gone into the room, had closed the door behind them, and Claire began to tremble as if smitten with ague. "Gladys—Gladys is unconscious," she moaned; "in—in a sort of stupor."

Basil Everett had put his arm round her waist, and had held her firmly from the moment that she came to him. Now he gently drew her further from the door and led her down to the sitting-room.

And they waited there, through the intolerable ordeal of suspense, till the doctors came down to them. Claire sat silent, and motionless except for the trembling that never ceased; and Everett and Miss Graham watched her, wrung with pity, suffering a torture of helplessness. She sprang up at sight of Dr. Wilcox, seized his hand, and spoke to him in a rapid, high-pitched, breathless voice that was quite unlike her own.

"You can save her, can't you? Is she very bad? Have you thought of all the things to do, to make her well again? Don't be afraid to tell me. With those we love it's best to *know*."

"My friend and I are going to discuss the treatment," said Dr. Wilcox. "Now, won't you go upstairs and sit quietly with your daughter?" And he asked Miss Graham if he and Dr. Draper might be left alone in the sitting-room for a few minutes.

When the others had left them they talked of the case. In the opinion of both it was hopeless; but, of course, a good fight must be made. Dr. Wilcox asked questions about its history, questions that Dr. Draper was unable to answer.

"Very sad," said Dr. Wilcox, looking at his watch. "I am very sorry for them."

"Don't you think," said Dr. Draper, "that it will really be a happy release, and that they will be saved from pain that might be worse later on?"

"Yes, I do think so," said Dr. Wilcox; "but *they* won't think so. I am afraid you'll have trouble with that poor lady. I didn't care for her look, or her manner, either. I'm afraid you may have her breaking down badly. The husband is all right. He's as firm as a rock."

"That's not her husband. I meant to tell you just now."

"Oh, really? Her brother?"

"No, only a friend."

"Then who do you think I had better talk to now? To him or to the mother?"

"It's not her mother, either. It's her aunt. Miss Graham is very sensible."

"Oh, I see. Well, let me talk to both of them."

Mrs. Morris and Pope had both noticed the doctor's misapprehension when they heard him address Colonel Everett as Colonel Vaughan, and Pope afterwards said with deep meaning, "I only wish he *was* her husband."

"I quite agree," said Mrs. Morris. "He's a very different style of gentleman from the real one."

The end came towards dawn of the day on which Basil Everett went back to duty in France. He had been at the house all through the night. For hours he had been waiting outside the sick-room door, and the dim white light showed his haggard expectant face when Dr. Draper came out of the room to say that all was over. He said he wanted to get Claire away from the bed, and he asked Everett to help.

"She knows," said the doctor; "but she tries not to believe. It is painful."

Truly it was painful. Claire was dreadful to see; her

eyes wild and distraught, her whole body writhing, her arms outstretched with hands that seemed to seek in the air for the small hands that had slipped away from hers. Outside the door, with Everett's arms about her, she began to struggle; and the violence of such a gentle yielding creature was more poignantly significant than all the rest.

"Oh, no, certainly not," she cried, in that high-pitched voice the tone of which had sounded ominous to an expert's ear. "I must be with my child. She's an only child. Do they know that? Then why do they keep me from her? I have stood a great deal—but I warned him I'd never stand that. Basil, help me. You said you would. Remember our promise" . . . And she began to whisper hoarsely and rapidly. "This is a trick of Roddy's. He has lied to me—he swore he'd leave us alone. Gladys and I were to be together. It was an agreement. I paid him. Don't let him cheat me again." And she called her daughter by name, loudly. "Gladys, wake. Gladys, come to me." Then in a moment she was limp and drooping, the fierce strength gone as if all the inward springs of life had snapped, and her tears began to fall. "Basil, are you, too, unkind to me? You are all the same. But no one can hurt me any more—not even God. Because I am quite alone."

Miss Graham took her from his arms, and he murmured incoherent entreaties, scarcely knowing what he said.

"Be good to her. Be kind to her. Take care of her. Don't let harm come to her."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Graham, "I'll take care of her. I'll guard her from harm. Go now—and don't get killed if you can help it. There—I'll write and tell you how she is."

CHAPTER XXV

IT was the spring of another year.

The war had ended and all the world was gay. Ease after labour; pleasure after pain; food, wine, and love —all that men and women had foregone they might now enjoy without a word of censure or a conscientious qualm. The astounding London crowd seemed greater than ever; it filled the pavements and overflowed into the roadways; as a purposeless tide, ebbing and flooding through the hours, it had shown this sea of vacantly contented faces since the flags, now torn and smoke-stained, first fluttered in their joyful brightness on the day the armistice was signed. Idle, good-humoured soldiers, too happy to salute, too tired to wear their belts, formed slow eddies round each house of entertainment, and by their multitudinous presence made even the oldest and safest civilians thrill to their supreme satisfaction. To be alive! What more should one ask, and what more had they hoped for? The rapture of life itself was the force that pushed and dragged this ever-moving human tide.

But Claire walked through the crowded streets as if they had belonged to a city of the dead, and as if she herself had been a ghost.

In all these months no one had seen her and very few had heard news of her. It was understood that Miss Graham and her niece were together somewhere in the depths of the country. The house in Hans Place had stood close-shuttered, silent, forlorn; but now its white eyes had blinked in the pale March sunshine and opened to the fresh March winds. Emily, driving past in her car, clutched Sir Leonard's arm. "Aunt Agnes must be back again!

To-morrow I'll run round and see if poor Claire is with her."

Claire was there, thin and white in her sad black dress, with dark circles round her eyes, and such a smile as you see on the lips of nuns when noisy, exuberant visitors come and chatter to them in the convent parlour. "Leonard," said her ladyship that evening in her room, "I never was so shocked in my life. She has lost her good looks *absolutely*. Aunt Agnes affects not to notice it. You know her way. But it's *startling*. So *thin*—and simply *colourless*." And Emily with unanalysed pleasure glanced at her own ample figure in the looking-glass and saw the complexion that surmounted it, richly glowing as a red sunset viewed across billowing downs.

Now, on this sparklingly bright afternoon, Claire walked slowly along Piccadilly to keep an appointment at the railway station in Dover Street. She was going to meet her husband there. He had written to say that he wanted to see her and to tell her how deeply he sympathized with her in her grief. Because of his kindly phrases it seemed impossible to disregard his wish, and, in spite of protests from Miss Graham, she had replied that she would be at the appointed place. Certainly Miss Graham would not have allowed her to go unaccompanied if Roddy had omitted to state in the letter that he had no wish to alter the covenant existing between himself and his wife. "But the mere sight of him will upset you," said Aunt Agnes, "and remind you."

Claire, however, felt no more emotion than if she had been going to meet a stranger; and when she saw him there was no other mental trouble than a slight difficulty in identification. That big, common-looking man in a blue serge suit and very new brown boots, with a soft grey hat on the back of his head—yes, no; yes, surely it must be Roddy.

"Claire!" He had thrown away a cigarette and was

clasping her hand. "It's good of you to come like this. I hope it isn't wrong for you to be out. You look wretchedly ill."

He, too, was shocked by the deterioration of her appearance.

"I am quite well again now, Roddy."

"Then come on, and we'll get somewhere for a cup of tea and a quiet talk."

Avoiding the thronged tea-shops he took her to a restaurant in Jermyn Street, where a drowsing waiter grudgingly cleared a table that was already laid for dinner.

"You see we are empty at this hour," said the waiter. "We don't expect people for tea."

"No, that's why I've come here," said Roddy, very much in his old style. "Two teas, my friend, and sharp's the word—or send the proprietor to me and I'll find out the reason why."

But though he spoke so briskly to the waiter, there was an unremembered kindness in his tone as he spoke to Claire. He looked across the table at her commiseratingly.

"No two words about it. You show what you have suffered, Claire."

Externally he was altered most by the disappearance of his moustache; the open view of his mouth seemed to have permanently unveiled the sensual characteristics that used always to show in moments of passion. There were new lines of care about his eyes, which themselves had a clearer, healthier aspect than during that period of swift degradation before his departure from London. In the keen air of America he had shaken off his sloth—perhaps from dire necessity—and he was still awake. He said he had seen some hardships, and this was probably true. The hair on each side of his temples had began to turn grey.

"Yes, Claire, that man Pottinger was a crook. It came out directly we got across, and I had the greatest difficulty

to extricate myself—and a part of the cash. However, after a bit, I was doing really well, and would have done better still, if only the war had lasted. Claire, no one can be blamed for not seeing how soon the end would come. But all at once the armistice was on us, and everything petered out." Then he said that he was over here only *pro tem.*, just looking about him. He would return to the States in the autumn. "But that's more than enough of me. It's *you* I want to hear of. Tell me about yourself."

"What can I tell you?" said Claire, sitting with her hands folded on her lap. "Roddy, I have been down in deep waters. I thought I was going mad. I *was* mad for a little while."

"Poor old girl. And you don't touch your bread and butter. No appetite? Well, well. What can I say to make you know how I sympathized—how sorry I was for you—when I heard?" He looked at her hollow cheeks, at those large eyes from which all the lustre had gone, at the slender, too slender, shoulders, feeling a sincere and painful regret; and it seemed to him that quite a noble thought arose within him and forced the utterance of his further words. "Claire, I'll set you free for ever, if you still wish it. I'll let you divorce me, as you asked so often."

And again she had that cloistral smile, like the flicker of wintry sunlight fighting the shadows on stone walls.

"No one can want me now—not you, Roddy, or anybody else."

"Oh, don't say such things as that," he said kindly and encouragingly. "You're under the weather now, but you'll soon pick up again—yes, and be your fascinating self again, too, making people look round at you in the street as they used to do, what!" And he smiled at her very kindly. "In my opinion what you want is sea air—Doctor Brighton, eh?" And he became thoughtful for a

few moments. "You know, Claire, I'm bound by the promise I gave you—but I want to do more. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you to make you easier in your mind. It was the idea of absolute freedom that you always hankered after—the dissolution of the marriage. Well, I say again, you shall have it."

He spoke firmly, conscious the while of a massive glow of magnanimous feeling; and yet, so wonderful and rapid are our processes of thought, he had automatically reviewed the whole situation from material points of view even in the moment of speaking. He did not really want her—she had hit the right nail on the head. It would be as much to his advantage as to hers to secure freedom. Even without looking for them, fair chances of marrying again might come to him in a world now full of rich war widows. With half the boys killed off, a still attractive man of mature age might be anyone's fancy.

Claire, for her part, was thinking dully and slowly. It was all too late. It did not matter, either way. Nothing mattered now.

But Aunt Agnes, when she heard of Roddy's offer, considered that it was of most tremendous importance. She said they must close with it at once, lest for some cruel freak he should withdraw it. "He is as dangerous to you as ever, Claire. Take my word for it, he will always be dangerous until you have legally cut yourself loose from him. I don't for a moment believe that in his hateful heart he means any better to you than he ever did. You should dread him most when he speaks kindly. The leopard does not change its spots."

With eagerness then she urged her niece to be punctual in keeping a second appointment two days after the first. Roddy had said that he would take forty-eight hours to think things over and decide exactly what should be done.

This time they met in Hyde Park, near the Achilles

Statue, and the day being mild and the grass fairly dry they sat on chairs at a little distance from the path with its passers-by, where, as Roddy pointed out, no long-eared donkeys would be gaping at them.

He said at once that he felt assured a divorce would be the best thing for Claire's future peace and comfort. He would therefore gladly agree to it—on certain conditions. Then he began to talk about money. He confessed that hard times had again fallen on him, owing to the disappointment about the duration of the war. He said he knew that Claire was now reduced to a low ebb herself, and he hated the idea of further curtailing her small income; but he hinted that, since the little one was gone, the demands on Claire's purse were naturally much less than in the past.

"No," she said listlessly. "I have little need for money now, Roddy." And she looked far away across the grass and through the bare trees, as far as her gaze could reach northwards towards the Marble Arch, to paths so often trodden by herself and the child a year ago. "How much do you want, Roddy?"

Roddy thought that a third of all she still possessed, say two thousand, would do him grandly, as the very last dollop for which he could ever touch her. That would be handsome, and it should not really bring her down too low.

"After all," he said cheerily, "Mrs. Gilmour, Miss Graham, and the others would never let you run really short."

Claire consented.

Then he told her that the money transaction must be a close secret between them. There should be no letter-writing, not even any cheque-writing. She had better get the money as soon as she could, drawing it from the bank in notes and quietly handing the notes to him. One could not be too careful. You had to be very slim directly you

began to play with the law. "If there was a suspicion of collusion, Claire, we should be carted."

Claire said she would do what he asked.

"Right-o! Your word's as good as your bond. Very well, then;" and though he did not snap his fingers, he had the same exultant tone that always used to come to him with the prospect of a good piece of business. "I trust you. And you can go straight ahead. Instruct your solicitors to-morrow—that old ass Collie, I suppose. Anyhow, the sooner the better. Count my desertion as beginning from when I went to America, and let Collie know I'll provide him with everything else he wants. The whole thing will be as easy as tumbling off a house. So there you are, Claire. You get your wish—and there goes the end of an old song."

And he began almost at once to speak of himself sentimentally and musingly. "If I had my life to live again, Claire, I'd set to work on another plan. I see so plainly where I failed. Things were against me, of course—my bringing up, that old devil who defrauded me. I got the feeling even as a kid that if I didn't assert myself, I should be trodden on by everybody. Yet I wasn't a bad sort, really, Claire;" and his voice became quite wistful. "I meant well. Another thing I've thought of these last days. Love isn't everything in marriage." He said this as if wondering how it might strike her, as an entirely new discovery. "I did love you, Claire—yes, and felt proud, and grateful to you. But love isn't *enough*. I blame myself for not understanding that. I seemed to get on your nerves sometimes, and I may have been unjust to you from thinking that you looked down on many of my ideas and weren't trying to help me as you might have done. That's all my justification," he said gently. "I don't attempt to shirk the blame."

And because of the gentleness and seeming kindness of his tone, Claire told him that perhaps she was as much

to blame as he. Her rash, ill-considered marriage had not in it even the germs of happiness. She had been too ignorant of the world, too unfitted to take up the duties of a wife. Then, under the impulse of the native and unquenchable generosity of her spirit, she paraphrased the words of Evan Giles and said that if Roddy had found a different sort of woman he might have been a good husband and a better man.

The soft mild air was on her face. All round them nature was again working her miracle; even here, in the midst of a city park, one could feel that the sleep that is so like death was passing away, and that awakened life was busy. The light itself was alive, active, searching, with tremulous effort seeking to warm and brighton all things that it touched. And it was as if Claire's frozen heart suddenly thawed; and she began to speak of the dead child.

"At first I had a belief that the weakness came from my state before her birth. You had made me—well, I had been unhappy at that time. And, Roddy, while I continued to think so I traced the fault to you, and laid it at your door. After that I tortured myself by thinking it was all my own fault—that I had not taken enough care of myself—that I had done foolish reckless things,—wearing myself out with fatigue. Those long walks! And do you remember that night when I worked for you? But I know now that it wasn't any fault of yours."

"My dear old girl, I should think not. I never saw a bonnier baby. Why, she was almost as heavy—they all said—as if you had run the full course."

"And it was not my fault either. It was inevitable. Nothing could have altered it, nothing could have prevented it. Roddy, I should have died if I had not come to understand and believe this. After she had gone I wanted to die—and people thought that I would not recover. But then a friend wrote to me."

"And what did she say?"

"It wasn't a woman; it was a man—a man I have a great respect for, because I know he is the soul of honour and would never trifle with the truth. He was out in France, in command of his battalion—Colonel Everett—and he wrote."

"Yes?" said Roddy, putting a large hand over his shaved mouth to conceal an incipient yawn. "Well, what did *he* say?"

"He told me what the two doctors had told him; and he got them both to write to me. One was Doctor Rice-Wilcox, a famous physician. They both said they were convinced that Gladys had been saved from great pain and suffering—that it would have been certain—that even her intelligence would have become darkened. And out of that thought, Roddy, will come the only consolation that I can ever know. For—for, if it was best for Gladys, how—how can I think of myself?"

CHAPTER XXVI

"NEVER, with my consent," said Mrs. Gilmour firmly.

"No, I thought that would be your decision," said Emily Joyce, who had come bustling round to Hague House to talk things over with her mother. "Although I must say, from what Leonard tells me, he has treated her very badly. I always suspected it. But what else could one anticipate? You know how I detested him from the beginning. He was only after her money."

"It must be two years ago," said Mrs. Gilmour, "when she told me the whole story, alleging that he made her so uncomfortable she desired a separation. I reasoned with her"—and Mrs. Gilmour made a gesture seeming to imply that she had yet to meet the person who could stand up to her in argument for five minutes—"I reasoned with her; and seeing that they had settled down together again and no more was ever said, I hoped and believed that she had abandoned the idea. It was separation then. Now we are asked to face a divorce. Oh, no;" and Mrs. Gilmour shut her eyes as if she had seen something very ugly indeed. "At such a time, too—when she is in deep mourning, and after a severe illness. Moreover, from her own point of view, and strictly between ourselves, what has she to gain by it? To all intents and purposes they are separated. Did you know that throughout that time when he was in America and she was over here in England they were not living together?"

"Yes, I know that;" and Emily gave her hard laugh, "That's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"I meant more than the obvious fact," said Mrs. Gilmour with dignity. "I meant that there was some tacit

understanding between them that they *intended* to live apart. It was something I did not like, but I refrained from probing into it. Still, if necessary now, I would sooner condone the continuance of the arrangement than set people talking by attempting to bring them together prematurely. So long as Claire remains in Hans Place it is easy to explain that in that small house there simply is not room for Roddy as a staying visitor. As Claire is in mourning she will not be going to dinner-parties, so no one will wonder at her being unaccompanied. Should the direct question be asked: 'Where *is* Captain Vaughan?' one can reply that he is out of London."

"So he is, too," said Emily. "Leonard has heard that he is following every race-meeting in the kingdom."

"Very well, then;" and Mrs. Gilmour again repeated her determination. The divorce proposal was to be ruled out absolutely.

"Mother, have you written to John about it?"

"Yes, my dear. But John is supine. He always was."

"Does Cyril know?"

"Yes. He has been to see her."

"Did he find her obstinately set on it?"

"No. He thinks it is your Aunt Agnes who is egging her on."

What had happened so far was that Miss Graham had been to Mr. Collie and instructed him to institute proceedings for divorce on Claire's behalf. As Roddy was now a consenting party there would be no difficulties and intricacies for Mr. Collie to make a mess of; she thought, therefore, that he might do as well as anybody else, and she felt that it might on the whole be convenient to have the matter dealt with by the family firm. But old Mr. Collie, knowing that he was on the black books of Mrs. Gilmour and feeling timorous of further offending her, considered it incumbent upon him to acquaint Hague House immediately as to the instructions he had received.

Thus Mrs. Gilmour heard the dreadful word divorce before there had been time for Miss Graham gently to prepare her sister's mind. Thus, too, Claire and her affairs were thrown back into the hands of her family, and the family took possession of her. Once more it seemed that she belonged to them.

She would have yielded to their pressure and renounced all effort at once. But not so Aunt Agnes. Cyril had correctly surmised that it was his aunt who really meant business. Miss Graham was ready for opposition, and would have set about surmounting it in her own quiet way if the idiotic Mr. Collie had allowed her leisure; but now that he had forced her hand she came out for battle, to fight the family one by one or all together, just as they preferred.

If she did not entirely defeat Cyril in a first encounter, at least she drove him from the field.

Cyril was now accepted candidate for a constituency in which a by-election might occur at any minute, and he naturally felt that he should be guarded from the slightest echo of dubious-sounding words. He said he must appeal to Claire's heart if her head did not show her the peril in which she was placing him. On this second visit to Hans Place he brought his bride with him, and fortune favouring the attack they got Claire all to themselves in the room on the ground floor.

"I am your sister, Claire," said Lady Esther. "Is it not so?"

Claire said she hoped it was so.

"Then when a sister speaks, you will listen to her voice and not mind what love prompts her to say as well as duty? Sisters are very near, Claire. More, even than a bruvver."

Lady Esther was like a large old-fashioned picture painted in subdued colours. Her russet toque seemed to shade off into the tints of her sandy hair and complexion; her mouse-velvet frock joined the shadows in hollows about

her neck, which was exposed by the low-cut collar as much as fashion ordained without risking a suspicion of immodesty; her eyes were slightly prominent, and from them there shone palely a quite unaffected sense of virtue and good intention.

Cyril, looking massive and solemn, but with an occasional petulance reminiscent of his unregenerate days, stood on the hearth-rug admiring Lady Esther and feeling proud of her. Only her bad relapse into the lisp from which he had been trying to cure her for nearly twelve months was irritating to him. He attributed it to nervousness. But if she went on like this she would be worse than useless on a political platform.

"Anuvver objection, Claire—have you weighed it?—the religious one. The voice of conscience cannot be smuvvered, whatever people say. It is in ourselves that we have to decide. My muvver never——"

"Yes, yes, that's all right, Esther," said Cyril, interrupting with perceptible irritation. "Look here, Claire, I'm very sorry and all that; but you really must drop it."

And it was just then that Aunt Agnes, having returned to the house, came quickly into the room.

"What is it that Claire is to drop?" she asked presently, after exchanging civilities with her new niece.

"This divorce," said Cyril. "We are both appealing to her to give it up."

"Oh, but why?" asked Aunt Agnes brightly. "For *your* sake, Cyril?"

"You can put it like that, if you like. For all our sakes."

"Oh, but I should speak for yourself alone," said Miss Graham. "Because naturally you carry the greatest weight. You have such tremendous claims on Claire's obedience to any wish of yours;" and she turned to Lady Esther with great sweetness. "Dear Cyril always subordinated his life to others; but his unselfish devotion to

Claire has been really too beautiful for words. In all things he bowed to her judgment or mere inclination. Fond as he is of you, dear Esther, he did not venture to propose for your hand until he had first been to Claire and secured her consent."

This oblique narration was too much for Cyril altogether. His still bronzed cheeks glowed in a crimson indignation, and he cut short Miss Graham with boyish protests. He had not come there to have his leg pulled; a joke was a joke; and so on. Besides, in sober truth, the matter had nothing to do with Aunt Agnes.

"What's it got to do with anybody except Claire herself?" she retorted, unusually warm and incisive in tone. "Fiddle-de-de. You go into parliament, Cyril, and talk your nonsense there. Don't come bothering *us* with it."

And she did not escort her young relatives past the latticed book-cases and through the small paved hall, as was her usual habit with visitors.

"Bless you, Claire!" she said fondly, when the door had closed upon them. "Don't let yourself he upset by such twaddle. Now here's a good piece of news. Derek Harpington is on our side. You see. The rest will follow like sheep. For once in his life he'll be leading them in a sensible direction. Not that he or any of them matter really."

Nevertheless Miss Graham felt that Uncle Derek was a great and invaluable ally, and she had put herself to pains in securing him. Pretending a respect for Derek's intelligence which she was far indeed from feeling, she asked him to advise as to what he thought would be best for Claire in all the circumstances. Then in the most humble manner she put the circumstances before him. Then still further to gratify Derek, she said she confided in him as well as respected him. Quite apart from the fact that Claire was still young and with fair prospects of marrying again if made free to do so, there was another reason, a

very cogent reason known only to Miss Graham herself, why the divorce should be obtained.

She told Uncle Derek this strictly confidential reason; and he was so much impressed by it that if he had not already allowed Miss Graham to make up his mind for him he now felt able to make it up for himself. He decided for the divorce.

The failure of Claire's marriage was a disappointment. He was not conscious of any slackness or shirking in the work he had put in when bringing it about; but it would be very pleasant if by taking further trouble he could get Claire the happiness he had always desired for her. He would then look back on it all as a bit of work that promised well, went wrong, but came right in the end. Nothing could please him more. And fortunately the kind old fellow was free at the moment to throw himself heart and soul into this delicate little affair. Since taking off his uniform as a special constable and carrying to a successful issue the secret wedding of those queer young people, the Granville Budleighs, he had been set to no real task by any of his friends.

He began his round at once, calling in the course of a single afternoon on Emily Joyce, the Bedminsters, Cyril, and winding up for tea with Mrs. Gilmour. There, in Hague House, as Derek well knew, lay the nut that had to be cracked before any substantial progress could be made. Very insidiously then old Derek began the operation. As Emily said, her mother simply didn't know what he was "getting at;" and herself impatient, she hurried things by blurting out an explanation.

Emily was excited now; she enjoyed all the talk, and the doubt and confusion thrown into one's mind by Derek's unexpected attitude made it so delightfully complex. When you are all agreed, discussion falls to the ground. But here was a real stinging subject for debate in which sides could be taken, hot words and even insults exchanged.

Not for many years had there been anything like it in the family. It was still a profound secret, of course—only to be spoken of in whispers outside the family circle.

And the talk went on. Cyril was moody, speaking of Uncle Derek as he used to do in the dim and almost forgotten past. "Who dragged that old ass into it? Surely *he* could have been kept out of it." Mrs. Gilmour walked immense distances as well as talking. Emily and Lady Esther offended each other somehow and no longer could talk comfortably together. Then, quite unexpectedly, Sir Leonard began to talk; and his own true Emily listening learnt in amazement that, without consulting her, he had gone over to the other side.

"I'm with Uncle Derek," said Leonard resolutely. "I think it's a dashed shame not to back up Claire in every way we can."

Meanwhile, one day, Miss Graham rang up Mr. Collie to ask him how he had got on, and was almost driven mad by his replies. He had done nothing at all. No, he said, he had been waiting to have his instructions confirmed. He had understood that this was the intention. He had quite thought that Miss Graham and Mrs. Gilmour were putting their heads together, thrashing the thing out, and so forth, and that he was not to move in the matter until he heard from her again.

Miss Graham then said things to Mr. Collie on the telephone which Claire hoped that Mr. Collie would not be able to hear. Yet that seemed unlikely; because everybody in Hans Place could have heard them.

This telephonic conversation and Uncle Derek's unflagging efforts soon bore fruit in a queer assembly at Mr. Collie's Gray's Inn office. Here Derek personally conducted Mrs. Gilmour for the purpose of meeting Claire, Miss Graham, and representatives of other interests, she having promised to weigh all considerations "and see what could be done." The time was early in the afternoon.

The rallying-place was Mr. Collie's own room—a fine big room with three high windows and deep window-seats therein.

Claire sat in one of the window-seats, Miss Graham in another; Mr. Collie, Senior, occupied his customary seat at his large writing-table; a leather armchair had been placed immediately on his right hand for the accommodation of Mrs. Gilmour, but she made little use of it; Leonard Joyce, possibly in some dim symbolism of his recently gained equestrian rank, sat cross-legged on a chair, and held the back of it as if it had been a pulling horse that wanted to get away with him; Uncle Derek, Lady Esther, and Mr. Collie, Junior, just drifted, resting themselves now here now there, then floating about again as the debate continued.

Cyril would have been here, but he was required in the constituency; so he had sent his wife. She knew his views. Emily fully intended to come until she heard of this arrangement; it was a deprivation to her to keep away, but she had not yet made it up with Lady Esther.

Old Mr. Collie began rather garrulously, perhaps rendered a little nervous by Mrs. Gilmour's severe stare. He said that they had never had a divorce suit in their office before, and but for the merciful fact that his son was now restored to him he might have felt doubts whether he was competent to undertake it. Mercifully, as he had said, his son—his son over there by the fireplace—had passed through all those appalling dangers, and escaped and remained alive.

"Let's hope he's more alive than his father," murmured Aunt Agnes, but so gently that only Claire, in the next window-seat, caught it.

Then, after a brooding pause, a statuesque silence that made everybody uncomfortable, Mrs. Gilmour rose and discoursed. There were many things she wished to say, many she wished to learn; and under her control and

stimulation a truly remarkable discussion ensued. It trended more and more towards the abstract and the academic, leaving the concrete case of Claire further and further behind. She herself sat in her window and was the only one who took no part in the talk. But from time to time when speakers lost the thread of their arguments they abruptly addressed her, as if turning to her for help either to pull themselves together or to cover their confusion of ideas.

"Does Claire really want to proceed with her action?"

"Of course she does," said Miss Graham, answering for her. "She *is* proceeding with it."

"Very good. Now you were saying, Uncle Derek, that the most thoughtful people agree that the grounds of divorce should be made equal for both sexes."

"No, it was I who said that, Joyce. I was telling you how, out in the trenches, we used to chat over——"

"Yes, but I wanted to put a point to Mr. Harpington."

"I expect you discussesd most things in those trenches, Dick. Go on, Dick, I am listening to you."

"Mr. Collie, you knew her father. Do you pretend that if he had been with us he would have moved with the times so far as to say that it is no consequence to a family what is said of one member of the family? Can you conscientiously avow that the disgrace attaching does not spread——"

"Where's the disgrace of an innocent person getting rid——"

"I don't think the uvver party ever escapes the diswepute frown upon her by the guilty party. Cyril and muvver and faver——"

"Esther, I am going straight on to see your father when we have finished here."

But would they ever finish? Suddenly, to the surprise of everyone, Mrs. Gilmour announced that she had made a

great advance from where she started. So far, she said, she had been at work on a main head. This head might be summed up by the broad question: "Is divorce ever justifiable?" Well, she had now satisfied herself that she was willing to answer that question affirmatively.

"Bravo," said old Derek, beaming and rubbing his hands as if it was all over.

But Mrs. Gilmour passed now to another head; a second question: "Is it feasible?"

"What the dickens do you mean by that?" said Leonard rather rudely. "Do you mean does divorce exist? Can people in England get divorced?"

"No, Leonard," said Mrs. Gilmour severely. "I mean, is it feasible in Claire's peculiar position?"

"Of course it is."

"I am not so sure of that, Leonard. I shall be glad to be satisfied that it is."

Then, this head disposed of, Mrs. Gilmour came slowly to her biggest and most businesslike question. Could a divorce be obtained for Claire without the mention of any names, or the appearance of a word concerning the case in the newspapers?

A really brisk chat ensued. Both the Collies took a favourable view. They said that, although the war was over, peace had not been signed, and the newspapers, still restricted in size, were crowded with public news. The pressure on their space was enormous, and reports of much more important things than divorce cases had to be left out. Besides, at no period would an undefended action of this character have attracted notice. Such a case slipped through the courts in an hour, or an hour and a half, quite unobserved. There was nothing in it to arouse curiosity or conjecture. Its name, seen previously in the list, would also escape attention and seem quite meaningless. Why should anyone give a thought to it—the parties themselves being practically unknown, not important

personages, not prominent members of society, or in any way illustrious?

Mrs. Gilmour did not, however, quite like that part of Mr. Collie's explanation, and he had to take it back. The Gilmour family did not occupy such an extremely small place in the world as those solicitors imagined.

Then old Derek put forward the idea that, to make assurance doubly sure, it might be just as well to "square the Press."

Leonard opined that this would be dangerous, if not impossible, and the younger Collie related an anecdote that he had heard in the trenches about a managing clerk, a Press man, and a box of cigars.

"Ah, but that method was too direct," said Uncle Derek. "Diplomacy, tact! There are always ways of getting *round* things." And without mentioning names, he cited a very apposite case, in which he had been largely concerned. A young couple had to be taken before a registrar and married, without anyone getting wind of the transaction. All the relatives felt a morbid dread of publicity. References in the papers would have almost killed some of them. But the thing was got through without a whisper, without a soul outside the family ever suspecting that it had happened.

"Well, how did you contrive on that occasion?"

"I did nothing at all," said old Derek simply. "It worked out just as you hope it may in this case. Nobody appeared to take any notice."

"Exactly," said Mr. Collie. "Nevertheless, you may rest assured, Mrs. Gilmour, that we will not run any risks or neglect any precautions. We shall leave nothing to chance. My son will see to that side of it, and will know how to deal with the representatives of the Press, if it seems desirable to tell them that mum's the word." And he added in a whisper that Dick had his head well screwed

on his shoulders, and had forgotten none of the tricks of the trade during his long war service.

So then, finally, Mrs. Gilmour said that, subject to her proviso of absolute silence, she was prepared, as supreme head of the family in the absence of her sons John and Cyril, to give consent.

At this moment a diversion was caused by the entrance of a boy carrying a tray, with a smoking breakfast cup and a large slice of cake. It was Mr. Collie's afternoon tea. No one had realized how time was passing, and all expressed surprise. Soon they left Mr. Collie, Senior, to his tea, and went down the carved oak staircase, escorted by Mr. Collie, Junior.

But the die had been cast. Claire was to be allowed her divorce.

CHAPTER XXVII

HER family had now completely readopted Claire, and more and more she became subject to their control. Having agreed to the divorce, they could no longer allow it to remain altogether in Miss Graham's hands. It belonged to all of them, not only as a subject of conversation, but as a real family game, in which every move must be closely followed, since each player was playing for the side, and all were equally keen to win.

The first move in the game was for Claire to establish the fact of Roddy's desertion. And to do this satisfactorily she must apply to the courts for an "order for the restitution of conjugal rights." Thus, Claire, like other wives in her unfortunate position, was forced to lend herself to the humiliating chicanery that is rendered necessary by the existing state of our divorce law and its administration. Though all the happiness of her life depended on her husband's absence, her legal advisers compelled her deliberately to give the false impression that she desired him to return; fully satisfied that death was preferable to ever being more to him than a wife in name, she had to beg him to let her be once more a wife in fact.

Her reluctance to follow these unworthy though usual methods became revolt when she was called upon, as a preliminary, to send Roddy a letter which in the most affecting terms implored him to grant her the solace of renewed marital relations.

"No," she said firmly; "nothing will make me say that."

"Of course," said Leonard Joyce, "any expressions you dislike can be altered. But in substance we all thought it such a good letter."

"Thundering good letter," said young Mr. Collie, with enthusiasm. "I think Eaton has done it splendidly. It covers the ground so well."

Leonard had brought Claire down to Messrs. Collie's office to polish off this preliminary piece of business, and they now explained to her that counsel's opinion had been obtained about the letter. It had, in fact, been drafted by Mr. Eaton, one of the cleverest juniors practising in the divorce court.

"Let me read it to you again," said Dick Collie. He was keen and alert, setting about things in good style; he had made a very favourable impression upon Leonard Joyce as really wide awake and not rusty from all that soldiering. As he read aloud now he threw much pathos into certain phrases, either unconsciously or trying to do them full justice. This, however, added to Claire's disgust.

"'What possible grievance can you nourish against me?'" read Collie. "Puts him in the wrong straight away. 'I have always made your home comfortable for you, and am only wishful to do it again.' Covering the ground, don't you see? 'You cannot say that I have ever encouraged the attentions of other gentlemen——'"

"I should say 'men,'" interposed Leonard. "I think men sounds better than gentlemen. Of course, you can say which you like, Claire."

"I won't say either," said Claire.

"Let me go on," said Dick Collie. "Then you can think it over. 'Oh, my husband!'"—he read this with tremendous feeling—"'Oh, my husband! Come back to me——'"

"Stop," said Claire.

They had a hard struggle with her; but at last they persuaded her that the law being what it is, and her desire being to obtain relief under the law, she must conform to recognized and approved procedure. A letter, modified in phraseology but unchanged in import, was eventually con-

cocted; and they made her write it out in her own hand before they would let her go.

But young Collie said that since she had proved rather unmanageable at the very kick-off, he advised Joyce to get her in hand, and begged that he would accompany her on all the future occasions when they wanted her at the office. Thus Leonard, as active ally to the Collies and intermediary between them and their client, came into the case almost as completely as if his own firm were managing it.

"Quite all right, my dear Claire," he used to say kindly. "You trust me. I thoroughly appreciate your feelings about these formalities. The whole thing is a farce. And it *is* degrading to have to submit to it all. But don't you worry over it. I promise to steer you straight through. Take my advice, and dismiss the thing from your mind—except when I tell you there's anything to do. Go on with your ordinary life as if nothing was happening. Amuse yourself with Aunt A., and come and see Emily and me as often as you will. Amusement will do you good, and you know Emily is nearly always in spirits. I am glad to see that already you're looking so much more like yourself. You were dreadfully run down, weren't you? But now you are picking up again, aren't you?"

He was very kind to her, and she felt grateful to him for all the trouble he was taking. She submitted herself to his directions and made no more difficulties.

Time then glided by, and in due course, under his careful escort, she made her first appearance in the law courts. Her application was heard, and the order for restitution of conjugal rights was made—an order that Roddy must obey within a fortnight.

Roddy, for his part, duly disobeyed the order; and, playing the game after the manner of a sportsman and a gentleman, he wrote Claire a shockingly curt letter, in which he stated that he had no intention of returning to her, and that to save her useless trouble he might as well

confess that he had passed a night at a certain named hotel with a certain unnamed lady.

"*That's* all right," said Leonard Joyce, with great satisfaction. "Now we have *got* him. He can't play the fool with us *now*. With such a wily bird one could never feel quite comfortable, but now the salt is really on his tail."

Then, again in due course, Claire filed her petition for the dissolution of her marriage, on the grounds of her husband's desertion and adultery.

It would, of course, be a long time before the case came on for hearing, but everything would be done to press it forward; and, once in court, as an undefended action, a judge would rattle it through without a jury before you could look round.

So far the game had been played without attracting the faintest public interest. Apparently the actual proceedings had been nowhere reported. Mrs. Gilmour, scanning illustrated and ordinary newspapers with feverish anxiety, could not see a name mentioned—much less a snap-shot picture of the lady who wanted her conjugal rights. Not a whisper of inquiry, not the faintest breath of scandal, disturbed the equanimity of Cyril or Lady Esther. As old Derek said, rather inaptly, "It had all gone as merrily as a marriage bell."

Meanwhile, Claire herself had now certainly gained much in health, and she was helped by the knowledge that her tardy freedom was coming, although at first the fact had seemed of so little consequence. Miss Graham was always talking about it; telling her every day, in a dozen different manners, that her life was not over, that she was still young, and that in youth one must never cease hoping. She also weighed upon the mental effect that is produced by being immune from any possibility of interference or restraint. Unless one is absolutely one's own mistress, one can neither help oneself nor other people. Gradually,

then, with slowly returning strength, Claire began to attach a higher value to the emancipated status that was to be given to her; she began to long for it, to count the months until it should be hers.

It was not that as yet she had any hope of real happiness; but already she was able to look forward without flinching to the quiet, colourless existence that alone is possible to those who have staked and lost all in one great love. The future was dull and blank as ever, but some painless, calm content perhaps might still be hers. She was moved by what Aunt Agnes said about being useful to other people, and also by her hints concerning the life of the mind. If by study she could improve her own mind, and in a very humble way do a little good to those about her, she might get through the long journey till this dim light changes to a restful darkness.

She worked now regularly at that women's league of her aunt's, where everybody was very busy in demobilization. The thousands of girls that these kind ladies had assisted when they were going into the Army required much more assistance now that they were coming out of it. There was a great deal to do on the spiritual as well as the material side, for in the reaction after the universal strain, a new, strange sort of rescue work became increasingly necessary. Claire, working harder than Miss Graham approved, seemed without effort to establish an influence in this direction that all noticed.

Among old friends there was one that she dreaded meeting. With deep thankfulness of heart she had learnt that Basil Everett lived to see the glorious end of the war; she owed him immense gratitude for the noble intuition that had made him send her the one message that had power to give her consoling thoughts in her darkest hour; and yet her memories of him were so pitifully woven with memories of Gladys, that she feared even the sight of his face or the sound of his voice as almost certain to

reawaken the intolerable anguish of the night of her child's death and bring back something of the distraction and despair that followed it. But she was ashamed of her want of fortitude, and would not purposely avoid him.

One afternoon, when she had returned from the League offices earlier than her usual time, Aunt Agnes ran out of the ground-floor room to intercept her in the hall.

"Claire dear, Basil is with me. If you think you would rather not see him——"

Claire did not try to escape from what chance had ordained. In a moment her fear had vanished. Without a thought, instinctively, she went into the room with Aunt Agnes; and, greeting her friend, she felt nothing of the distress that she had morbidly dreaded. She had forgotten herself, and was merely glad to see him.

As they all three sat talking Aunt Agnes watched the other two, and according to her custom, made swift deductions from what she observed. In Basil Everett's eyes, at least, Claire was what she had always been. He saw no change in her; and for him nothing would ever change her.

Aunt Agnes, herself talking with gentle sprightliness, admired and loved him for every tone of his voice, every look of his kind, grave eyes, as without a single direct or indirect allusion to the past, he seemed to be able to make Claire understand both his sympathy in her grief and his pleasure at being with her again.

After this he came to the house whenever he was in London. He was being employed on interesting and important tasks. He had been sent on errands of moment, into the heart of Germany, to Constantinople, to Finland; and he had much to tell them of his experiences. Not only Aunt Agnes, but many other people, said that great things were in store for Basil. Everybody recognized that he was a marked man; he would have a dazzlingly brilliant career.

"And not a bit spoilt by success, is he, Claire?"

Certainly he was modest. In his long talks with Claire they dealt nearly always with immaterial things—the characters of historical personages long since dead, or the thoughts of men and women who had lived only within the pages of books—and although Claire, recognizing the extent of his reading and the acuteness of his critical faculty, expressed her views with great diffidence, he treated them always with respect, even when he differed from them, and sometimes subordinated his judgment to hers. Moreover, when they spoke of material affairs, he paid her the most subtle of all compliments by frankly asking for and seeming to value her opinion. In a matter nearly concerning himself he asked once for her advice. He told her that immediately after the armistice, colonial friends of his had urged him to go out to Australia with them, and, abandoning the Foreign Office, take up the rougher, larger work that lies on the fringes of our Empire. It would have been commercial rather than political work, and after much doubt he had decided to stick to his old trade.

Claire, compelled to give an opinion, said she thought he had decided wisely.

"You think so? Better fifty years in Europe than a cycle—anywhere else." And he smiled. "But the countries of to-morrow—and the day after, Mrs. Vaughan? Great work—if one could do it."

He had a car of his own now, and during the month of July he took them for some long country drives. There was sadness but no pain to Claire in revisiting places where they had been with him a year ago: the memory of Gladys was holding them together instead of holding them apart. No one had been so good to the child as he.

Thus Claire's friendship with him was renewed; a trustful, candid intercourse, as pleasant to her as it was comforting; the only friendship of the kind that she had ever known.

In August Miss Graham took Claire with her to Brighton, and they stayed at a corner house in Schomburg Square. It was a lodging-house, but Miss Graham had taken the whole of it; at first intending to invite some of the more friendless of her League girls to fill unoccupied rooms, and then abandoning the idea, because, as she confessed, she did not feel up to the effort of entertaining them. She was very tired, and she needed rest and quiet.

It was so unlike Aunt Agnes to admit as much as this, that Claire felt, if not alarmed, a little anxious. She watched her aunt narrowly, and devoted herself to her entirely, keeping her amused while avoiding all fatigue. To her delight she saw the almost instantaneously good effect of the strong sea air. After a few days Aunt Agnes seemed to have recovered all her habitual energy and liveliness. She enjoyed the gaiety of the crowded sea front as well as the prettiness of the inland country; she was able to detect the weaknesses and make quiet fun of the pretensions of their landlady quite in her old style.

The landlady was a faded and decayed gentlewoman, who highly approved of Miss Graham's grand way of paying for more accommodation than she used, in order "to keep to herself." She said, "How well I know your feeling! One *must* keep to oneself. But, alas, in my own case, all that sort of thing is over and done with;" and she showed Miss Graham two very feeble water-colour sketches in the drawing-room, that pallidly represented a church and a country mansion belonging to grandeurs of her past. She also drew attention to pieces of furniture that had known her when she was a girl moving in the best county society. "That book-case downstairs in the dining-room stood in Papa's study at the rectory;" and she pointed again to the picture of the church. "I notice that Mrs. Vaughan was quick to examine my little collection of books. I was like her once, an avid reader; but now"—and she

gave a genteel sigh—"those two girls, May and Alice, take every minute of my day looking after them. I hope that so far you have had no cause to complain of the attendance. I beg you to tell me if it is not what you are accustomed to. I do know so well."

Aunt Agnes mildly diverted herself too with the maid-servants, May and Alice, asking them how they reconciled it with their consciences to spend so much money on dress instead of saving up for their old age, in case they never found anyone to marry them. May tossed her head and answered cheekily, while Alice slyly smiled and puckered her apron when Miss Graham ventilated this horrible supposition. It would not be their fault if such a fate befell them; for on alternate evenings each went out dressed in her best, either to prowl with old admirers or hunt for new ones. They were the very commonest sort of girls, although their mistress honestly tried to teach them manners and make them worthy of the mob caps and embroidered aprons that she herself provided. Claire disliked May a little more than Alice, perhaps only because she saw more of her; but ultimately she had bitter reason to remember both of them.

Yet in spite of May's occasionally offensive familiarity and the landlady's genteel meanness and incompetence, Aunt Agnes and Claire were comfortable enough. Careless of what they eat, not minding a little extra trouble, the nicest sort of women are always easy to satisfy; whereas, on the other hand, the very nicest and noblest of men must be properly fed and waited on.

Thus Aunt Agnes naturally struck a new note when announcing that she expected a male visitor for the week-end.

"Claire! That dear fellow Basil is coming to us to-morrow. Won't it be lovely to have him with us? I'll engage the car from Thomas, so that we can take him for some big excursions."

And at once she began a pleasant bustle of preparation; in which Claire gladly joined. They debated where they should put him. There was a large, empty bedroom on the ground-floor behind the dining-room, and this would be convenient; but they decided that it was dark and dingy. There was nothing on the drawing-room floor for him, because the three bedrooms there were already swamped by themselves and Miss Graham's own maid. Claire at this point offered to vacate her own room for him and move to the floor above; but Miss Graham would not hear of it, and on reflection they both agreed that he was so active that he would not in the least mind mounting as high as the second-floor. They went straight up to the second-floor bedroom and decided that he would be quite happy there; quiet and undisturbed too, with only the landlady for neighbour, and the house-servants all above him on the top floor. He was not bringing a servant, but Miss Graham's maid declared herself well able to valet him.

"And we'll put some flowers in his room, Claire. Yes, he has a glimpse of the sea from this window. And, don't forget, Claire, we must tell that old humbug not to play her trick with the electric light."

The landlady's trick with the electric light—a well-known pleasantry of landladies—was to switch it off at the meter at eleven p.m. There was gas instead of electric light on the stairs, and sometimes she turned that off too.

"We shall have to get in some wine, of course. And, Claire, you and I must do a little regular marketing to-morrow morning. If you think of things, tell me."

So all that day and the morning of the next day passed in cheerful occupations. Claire herself arranged the flowers on the visitor's dressing-table and superintended May in a final tidying of the whole room. She was no less anxious than her aunt to do him honour; she felt a calm elation as she thought of how his presence would brighten all the house for them; and it was with an active,

lively pleasure that she looked forward to the long excursions of which Miss Graham had spoken. The weather was gloriously fine.

He arrived soon after luncheon, and that first afternoon was perfect. The hireling car carried them over the downs into pretty, secluded valleys, by the side of slow streams and under hanging woods; they had tea in a farmhouse garden, and when they got back to Brighton Miss Graham insisted on their leaving the car and walking home over the broad lawns of Hove, and through the closest pressure of the holiday crowd. She was as gay and light-hearted as a girl of twenty, and the innocent happiness of the kind old soul communicated itself to her two younger companions.

Basil Everett praised the house, praised the cooking, praised everything. Upstairs in the drawing-room, after dinner, he said that the view from the balcony was as beautiful as anything you could see on the Bosphorus.

"What rubbish!" said Miss Graham, laughing. "Of course you don't mean it."

"Of course I don't," said Basil, laughing too. "I'm only trying to be complimentary, and allowing for the glamour of night. Really and truly, as soon as Brighton becomes invisible, it's as beautiful as any other place that's hidden by darkness. Come and see for yourself, Mrs. Vaughan."

He was standing by the open window, looking very tall as he leaned against the landlady's cretonne curtains, the lamplight on his thin, sunburnt face, and the darkness behind him seeming like another curtain, of black velvet. Miss Graham sat smiling at him, admiring him, thinking that he was like a splendid picture by Van Dyk. Claire went across to him, and they stood for a few moments side by side, looking down at the shrubs and trees in the garden of the square, the lighted windows of other lodging houses, and the bright lamps of the King's Road. In truth, the

glamour of night lay over all these common things. After the long, hot day a faint, sweet breeze came creeping inland from the sea, and one heard its murmuring voice when one listened in silence.

"I think you are too severe on Brighton," said Claire. "Especially after all we showed you this afternoon."

The short evening passed too quickly. They tried to make him talk about himself; and although he would not do that, he talked delightfully on all other subjects. At half-past ten the ladies withdrew. Miss Graham rose with a regretful sigh, and said she would like to sit chatting like that all night, but as she wanted to be in good form to-morrow she had better go to bed.

"Besides, he has had more than enough of us, Claire. No doubt he is dying to go and smoke. Oh, Claire, we have forgotten to get him any cigars."

"I am so glad," said Basil Everett, smiling.

"Why?"

"First, because cigars bought by ladies are apt to be dangerous; and secondly, because I don't smoke cigars at all."

"He has none of the vices, Claire, and every one of the virtues," said Miss Graham fondly. "Good-night, dear Basil;" and she took his hand and pressed it affectionately. "Thank you for having pity on two poor lonely women."

"Thank you," said Basil, "for having pity on one poor lonely man."

"Good-night. Sleep well."

"Of course I shall. The perfume of those lovely flowers will make me dream that I am sleeping in a Persian garden."

Claire, alone presently, had the echo of these words in her ears. What a pretty thing to have said! A Persian garden—that meant a garden of roses. She was glad that she bought those big roses for him, and not anything else.

Walking about her room instead of at once going to bed, she thought of other things that he had said. How charming he was with Aunt Agnes; so exactly catching her humour; talking to her chaffingly, and yet with a manner that was both protective and deferential. Aunt Agnes adored him, of course. Claire sat in front of her dressing-table and mused on the afternoon's drive. She had enjoyed every minute of it; she had been as happy as she could ever be. Any greater sense of peace would seem a treachery to Gladys. But now, after the quiet contented hours, she began to feel restless. It would be a long while before she slept to-night; and looking round for her book, she thought she had better go downstairs and fetch another gem from the collection of the landlady. There were three or four of the Waverley novels on the bottom shelf of that book-case.

She went down into the dining-room and turned on the electric light; and the next instant it went out again. It was the landlady's trick. After all, they had not warned her, and punctual to her usual hour she had doomed the sitting-room to darkness. Claire, groping her way to the book-case, felt annoyed, because the visitor might have wanted to use the room. A bump into the end of the sofa told her she had reached the vicinity of the book-case, and she went upon her knees to feel for the volumes on the bottom shelf. A faint illumination from the street lamp outside the window crept into the room to help her.

Then somebody else came gropingly through the doorway, and Basil Everett's voice sounded. He had been for a stroll to the beach.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It is I!"

"Oh, Mrs. Vaughan! Why in the dark? Let me turn on the light for you."

Claire explained that this was impossible.

"Then I'll get my torch. I left it in the hall." And he

came back with one of those long electric torches that are like small truncheons, and flashed its strong light. Claire found her book, and for a little while they stood talking; he telling her how he had this particular torch with him in the war, and used it as he walked along the trenches on his nightly round. He asked her to keep the torch.

"Oh, you are too kind. But I mustn't really."

"Do, to please me;" and he flashed it and put it into her hand.

Claire accepted the gift, and they lingered talking for another few moments.

Then there came a knock at the door. After the custom of lodging-house servants, both May and Alice were punctilious in knocking at the doors of the sitting-rooms before entering them; and the knocker now was the girl Alice, who had returned from her evening out, and in the low gas light from the hall showed a silhouette of fashionable walking costume. She apologized for disturbing the occupants of the room.

"I fancied I heard voices, but wasn't sure, ma'am."

Claire said that Alice had not disturbed them, and told her to ask her mistress not to switch off the current tomorrow night.

Upstairs in her room again, Claire stood looking at the torch as it lay upon her dressing-table, with tender thoughts for the man who had used it, and a determination that as long as she lived she would never part with it.

Next day opened brightly and happily, and for the better part of it all was well; but it closed in sadness.

Miss Graham was full of energy, and while Claire went to church, took a walk with Basil along the sea front. After luncheon they all three went for a lengthy jaunt in the car, had another wayside tea, examined a ruin, and clambered up a rough footpath to enjoy a famous view across the weald of Sussex. Then quite late, when they

were spinning homeward on the London Road, Claire noticed her aunt's pallor and breathlessness. Borne up by her indomitable spirit, the brave old soul had done more than her physical state warranted. But even then she would not confess that she felt ill.

In the hall at Schomburg Square she fainted. She recovered consciousness very quickly, and leaning on Basil Everett's arm, went up to her room. She said she would rest for half an hour and then be all right for dinner. But Claire was alarmed now, as one is always at an unmistakable sign of weakness in a person who has been notoriously strong. Never in the history of the family had Aunt Agnes been known to have a day's real illness.

They sent for a doctor; and the doctor proved reassuring. He said he anticipated no serious trouble; the old lady had exhausted herself, and that was all. However, one could not be too careful in dealing with people of advanced age. Miss Graham must therefore go to bed and remain there for a day or two, and he thought it would be advisable to have a nurse. If possible, he would get one at once to keep watch during the night. He could not absolutely promise to find a nurse, because they were both scarce and over-worked, but he would do his best; and he added, with considerable wisdom, that the advantage of having a nurse would be to let Miss Graham's own maid get her proper night's rest so that she might be fresh and active for the more important work of attending to her mistress during the day.

"But I can sit up with my aunt," said Claire.

"I think the same applies to you," said the doctor, good-humouredly. "Your aunt will want you more in the daytime."

About an hour after his departure the nurse arrived—"straight from the end of another case," as she announced at once.

"This a night-job too! Just like my luck;" and she

told them she was regularly worked to death; expected to do without food or sleep either, and to keep going all the time like an eight-day clock rather than a creature of flesh and blood. "Heart trouble, isn't it? And an elderly patient? Well, just let me have a peep into the sick room, so as I can get my bearings; then I'll set my traps shipshape, and be ready for you. I suppose you can do me a bit of supper?"

She made a very unfavourable impression on Claire. She was a woman of about forty who seemed naturally capable and business like enough, but a stupid, muddled look came into her face every now and then while she egotistically chattered about the hard work at the hospital; and presently Claire felt a suspicion that she had been drinking and was still under the influence of alcohol. Agitated by this horrid thought, Claire got Basil Everett to come up to the first floor landing and have a little talk with the nurse without allowing her to guess that she was being critically examined. This he did in Claire's presence; and he was able unhesitatingly to banish the ugly suspicion. The woman was absolutely sober, but very tired. And he sensibly suggested that she should be given some food and then be allowed to lie down for an hour or two before she relieved Miss Graham's maid.

"That's a nice considerate gentleman," said the nurse, going off to her supper; and when she reappeared, to go on duty a little before eleven o'clock, she looked neat, trim, quietly efficient—all that a nurse should be.

Meanwhile Aunt Agnes was obviously going on well. There was no more breathlessness; she said she was quite comfortable, and she looked quite comfortable. But it was touching to observe her unselfish wish that the comfort of others should not be interfered with, and her contrition at having caused trouble.

"I am so dreadfully ashamed of myself, Claire. This sort of thing is out of my line. I don't do such things,

do I? But now you must prevent everything being spoilt for Basil. Do go down and see that he has his dinner properly. It is very late. And take him for a walk afterwards. It is such a lovely night. Please—please do as I ask. I can't bear to spoil things."

But of course all things were spoilt. Her insistence was so strong that Claire, very much against her own inclination, left her once more after their hurried meal. For perhaps twenty minutes she and Basil walked round and round the square, in sight of the house all the time, and all the time talking of Aunt Agnes.

After the nurse had assumed charge of Miss Graham's room, Claire still sat there for a little while. Aunt Agnes was asleep, breathing easily, showing no sign of discomfort. The nurse whispered, "She'll do nicely now."

Then at last Claire left her; but half an hour later love drew her back to the room. She could not herself go to bed and sleep soundly until she had made sure that all was still going well. So she slipped on her dressing-gown, armed herself with her torch, and went out into the passage.

She listened at the door, then softly opened it and went into the room. Aunt Agnes had not changed her position. In the faint illumination from a night light that the nurse had set upon the mantleshelf, Claire saw the pale outline of the face against the pillow just as it had been, and stooping over the bed she listened to the breathing. It was easy and regular. Aunt Agnes was sleeping like a weary child.

But Aunt Agnes was not the only person asleep in the room, as Claire soon discovered. There was a sofa at the foot of the bed, and on this the nurse had subsided into deep and unconcerned slumber.

Claire, felt a glow of indignation at this breach of trust, and was about to put her hand upon the woman's shoulder to rouse her when a gentler thought checked the impulse. After all, it was a crime of nature—probably not even

premeditated by the woman herself. The poor over-driven wretch was dead tired, as Basil Everett had seen at a glance; not a piece of mechanism but a thing of mere flesh and blood, as she herself had said. So Claire's feeling changed from instinctive anger to reasoned pity, and she thought, "Let her sleep for a little while and I will watch for her while she sleeps."

Then Claire went to the window and sat there, glancing from moment to moment at the motionless figure on the bed and thinking, while the nurse heavily slept on. After she had been there a little time, she fancied that she heard movements or footsteps outside on the landing, and she went softly to the door and listened. But all became silent again, and she went back to her seat by the window.

There had in truth been somebody passing to and fro outside the door. To-day it was the evening out of the other girl, May; and May, very grandly attired, had prolonged her evening to a late hour. She had come up the stairs with a lighted candle in her hand, had noticed that the door of Claire's room was ajar; then, after going on tip-toe up and down the passage and looking into the drawing-room, she did a curiously impertinent thing. She went tip-toeing into Claire's room, and pryed all round and about it. Then still on tip-toe, with her large fashionable hat casting monstrous shadows in the candle light, she went upstairs to the top floor and her own quarters.

Claire sat by the window thinking. Hour after hour passed and neither of the sleepers awakened. The nurse changed her attitude; with a somnolent groan subsided still further, and lay stretched at full length in the almost deathlike unconsciousness of supreme fatigue. The patient stirred now and then, sighed faintly once or twice, but never moved to a different posture.

The summer night was as warm as the daytime; through the open windows the rhythmic murmur of the sea came soft and low, a vibration filling all the silence of the room;

and Claire's vigil lasted till long after the shadows had slowly crept away and the cold morning light had turned to golden fire.

And throughout the darkness and the dawn her heart was heavy with a burden of sadness—the sadness of life itself; vaster than the sea, more invincible than the tides, more overwhelming, each time that one really thinks of it, than the inconceivable distances that lie between us and the further stars. "Only this one little life, Claire!" An arrow of light darting into a dark place—like these rays at the side of the window blinds—spreading into coloured radiance, swiftly fading; and then again the darkness!

When Claire returned to the room at breakfast time Aunt Agnes welcomed her with the good news that she *felt* quite well again. The nurse for her part announced that Miss had passed an excellent night.

"She slept like a top," said the nurse cheerfully. "I kept waiting for her to wake up, so as I could give her her medicine; but as she didn't, I wouldn't disturb her."

Claire looked at the woman coldly and critically, feeling a contempt for her now. She might be excused for the failure in her duty, but there was no excuse for trying to conceal it with such effrontery; and Claire at once determined that they would get rid of her. She was a person that they could not safely trust.

The nurse, however, was dismissed for other reasons before the morning was over. Much to Claire's surprise the doctor announced after a little private conversation with his patient that Aunt Agnes was keenly desirous of returning to London that very day, and he saw no reason why she should not safely take the journey. He said she seemed to have the idea that she would be safer in her own house than anywhere else, and he advised Claire not to oppose her wish.

"It would be easy to me to keep her here and make a case of it," said the doctor, good-humouredly. "But

honestly I don't feel justified in detaining her, since she appears to be so set on getting home."

Aunt Agnes herself apologized for her whim.

"Claire, I'm a selfish wretch to cut short your holiday. It's a sort of superstitious feeling that makes me do it. After my stupid behaviour of yesterday I shouldn't feel comfortable here. You know, I don't for a moment think I'm going to begin that sort of thing again; but if by any chance I should be in for some sort of illness, well, there's no place like home. And what really decides me is having Basil here to manage the journey and take care of us."

So packing was at once begun, and in the afternoon they travelled back to London without any mishap. Miss Graham seemed quite herself again as she trotted about the familiar rooms in Hans Place. Basil Everett came back to the house for dinner, and they had another pleasant peaceful evening.

Aunt Agnes was all right for a week, for ten days, and then she had another fit of breathlessness. She did not faint on this occasion, and she recovered as quickly as before. But her London doctor said she must be kept very quiet. He said that for a long time she had been doing too much; now she must really give herself a chance.

There was no further attack, and as time passed, Claire's anxiety became less and less. She devoted herself altogether to her aunt, letting the League work get on without her aid. The bond between them had become very close, and the tenderness and love that Claire showed in every word and act were instinctive and not merely the conscientious payment ordained by gratitude.

As they sat together of an evening, Miss Graham talked often of the future; not only of time near at hand, but of long pleasant years to come.

"If only this divorce business would move a little faster, Claire!"

And she said that the dreadful slowness of the Collies, of Leonard Joyce, and of everybody else, was more than irritating, it was maddening. They had promised to do wonders in expediting matters, and it seemed to her that they had not succeeded in doing anything at all. They had assured her that, at the worst, the case would come on for hearing in this next term, and now they began to say that because of the congestion of the courts it might be still further delayed to the following term.

"That would mean not till after Christmas, Claire—not till next year. And after you get your decree it will be another six months before you are really free. Is it not sickening? You are much more philosophical than I am, Claire. The delay worries me fearfully."

Claire said she longed to have the case over and done with, but she supposed that they must be patient, and that Mr. Collie and the others were doing all that lay in their power.

Then one evening, Miss Graham spoke of Claire's using her freedom some day and marrying again.

"I am not likely to do that," said Claire.

"Why not? Of course you'll do it."

Then Claire spoke of her position after the divorce, asking her aunt many questions. What would the world say of her and think of her? Her own real friends would know the truth; but to everybody else would she not be a woman under a stigma—the sort of person for whom one feels a half contemptuous pity and with whom one carefully avoids friendship and intimacy? In the beginning Esther, Emily, everybody had warned her of the disrepute, if not the actual disgrace, that attaches to a divorced wife, whether innocent or guilty; and it must be true, or they could not all of them have said the same thing. How

then could she ever think of involving anyone else in her lowered prestige?

But Aunt Agnes strenuously endeavoured to persuade her that all such ideas had long since died out. Besides, in a case like this, put through without publicity, in these still stirring times, the cruel old prejudices, even if existent, could never touch her. The man who married her would never suffer under the world's attitude towards his wife. "No one will know or care whether you were married before or not. If they hear you had another husband, they will take it for granted that he was killed in the war—as he *ought* to have been, and as I only wish he *had* been."

And almost immediately Aunt Agnes went on to speak of Basil Everett.

"Aunt Agnes, please, please don't say these things."

But Aunt Agnes would not stop; she continued with gentle determination.

"Claire, I can't hide my great wish. Before I die I want to see you two happily married. You can trust *him*, Claire. I know that he will make up to you for all that you have gone through. Claire dear, he loves you with such a pure and noble love."

"Aunt Agnes, stop. It is wrong for me even to listen to you. But, believe me—on my word of honour—he has never said anything to hint at more than the simplest friendship."

"Oh, Claire! You are not *blind*. Anyhow, *I* know." And she told Claire how Basil had admired her as an unmarried girl, and how she herself had hoped that they would become engaged. "It would have been all so easy and natural—if only you and he had been given a chance. But then that monster came upon the scene, and that drivelling old man's persecution and the imbecility of your mother drove you into his arms. So dear Basil lost you. Now I'm not pretending that he went away broken-hearted and thought of nothing but you year after year.

No, not a bit. But he did remember you, Claire—so well, that when he saw you again the old feeling revived and became a thousand times stronger. You're the only woman in the world for him."

And again Claire begged her aunt to say no more.

"All right, dear. But you may trust me. Of course he cannot in honour tell you now. But the day the decree *nisi* is made absolute Basil will claim your hand; and if you refuse him you will make me a very unhappy old woman."

Was it true that he loved her in this way? In those bright September days during which her aunt remained well and full of hope, Claire gave herself for a little while to the dream of future happiness.

Yes, it was true. Much, much more than freedom and peace was coming to her. Her candid heart and honest brain, the very soul of her, rejected pretence and went out to meet the innocent truth. For the first time in her life she measured and understood what love between a man and a woman should be. No words had been spoken, but there was no need of words. Spirit had bound them together; in spirit they were already one. Each needed the other.

While the dream lasted, she thought of all that life with such a man would mean. Nothing mean or common would mingle with it; always he would be lifting her towards higher things, and passionate love itself would be a flame that purified and did nor sear. In such joy as this there should be no treachery to Gladys. Gladys herself would understand. Gladys herself loved him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"HAVE you heard the dreadful news?" said Emily Joyce gaspingly to all the friends she met as she hurried from the darkened house in Hans Place and round the corner into Hague Street.

"No, what is it?"

"Aunt Agnes died last night. Is it not dreadful? Only took to her bed three days ago. We all thought it was nothing at all. My poor sister was with her. She is in a pitiable condition—such an awful shock! I'm only going to sit with mother for a few minutes, and then I shall get back to be with her again."

And on the sunlit pavements of Sloane Street kind and beautifully dressed ladies paused in their shopping to talk of it, both to-day and the days that followed.

"Did you know that old Miss Graham—Mrs. Gilmour's sister—who lived in Hans Place?"

"Yes—but very slightly."

"Well, she's dead. Died quite suddenly. Lady Joyce—is dreadfully upset about it."

"She was a rather queer old soul, wasn't she—I mean eccentric—a socialist or something?"

"Yes, I rather think she was. But they were all very fond of her. Emily Joyce said her sister—you know, the one who's divorcing her husband—Mrs. Vaughan—is heart-broken."

Thus light tongues sounding in the sunlight spoke of the gentle yet courageous heart that had for ever ceased to beat in sympathy with the oppressed and in scorn of the tyrannical, while Claire wept for her behind the drawn blinds of the house that had now become her own.

Very soon this further news was flashing through the

family and round the wider circle of their friends. Miss Graham had left Claire the pretty little house in Hans Place and about sixty thousand pounds.

"All that she died possessed of," said Sir Leonard solemnly. "Nothing whatever to anybody else," and he glanced at his faithful Emily to see how she was taking it.

On the whole Emily took it better than might have been expected. Bursting with indignation for a few minutes, she soon calmed down; and before long she declared herself reconciled to what in her first warm glow she had spoken of as "outrageously unfair." Even in these terrible times, with an income tax and super tax of savage ferocity, she and Leonard had really as much money as they could possibly use; whereas to poor Claire, denuded of everything, a modest sixty thousand would make all the difference in the world.

"Only I *must* say, it is like Aunt Agnes to do it in a rude manner—leaving one right out in the cold, without so much as a souvenir, not even a piece of plate." Emily said this during the phase of cooling down. "However, it is what I might have expected. She always made prime favourite of Claire, and there was never any love lost between her and me. I was too outspoken for her taste. I let her know my mind, whatever the subject, and no doubt I often touched her on the raw."

Leonard, remembering the polished sharpness of the poor dead lady's tongue and the redness of dear Emily's face during arguments between them witnessed by himself, doubted whether it was not Aunt Agnes rather than Emily by whom "the raw" was really touched. But he said nothing. He was genuinely pleased that this legacy had come to Claire, to re-establish her in a state of competence and independence after being brought so low by her rascal of a husband.

Mrs. Gilmour was equally pleased, and for the same

reason. She said at once, "Now we shall have no more of those dreadful addresses that Claire used to give us. I cannot exaggerate how painful it was to me throughout that time when Claire was living first in one set of lodgings and then in another. Not from any snobbish reasons; but simply because it was so impossible to explain when people questioned me, and because, although Claire was very brave about it, I knew she must really feel it as much as anybody else." Then Mrs. Gilmour expressed surprise at the amount of money left by her sister. "It is so much more than I should have anticipated. I confess it baffles me. I can only suppose"—and she said this rather plaintively—"that Agnes must consistently have *saved* money and somehow or other avoided making unfortunate investments. She was of course childless."

Cyril took it badly. He thought that it was the sacred duty of the family to support him now that he had not only secured a wife who did credit to them all, but was likely at any minute to get into Parliament. He spoke unkindly of Claire, saying that she had failed in *her* duty by not making Aunt Agnes remember *her* duty. He had no wish to cut Claire out of her inheritance, but he considered that half the estate would have been sufficient for her and that clearly the other half should have come to him.

Mr. Collie senior took it worst of all. He was seriously offended because Miss Graham had employed another firm of solicitors to draw her will. This appeared to him a slight. He attended the funeral; but he had not his usual agreeable funeral manner. He looked glum and huffed.

He did not, however, make Claire suffer by reason of his natural feeling of resentment. Mrs. Vaughan was not to blame. Indeed he, and others too, showed her now the added deference that is due to ladies of substantial means. She was no longer the one indigent member of a well-to-do family, being re-adopted and rescued by her kind-hearted

relatives; she was, so to speak, a client standing solidly on her own legs.

This notion of enhanced importance, or at any rate of increased power, was perhaps unconsciously in the minds of many people as they talked and thought of Claire. You cannot be poor and then become comparatively rich again without causing friends and well-wishers to wonder about you. Would Claire continue to live in Hans Place, or would she let the house furnished and travel? Would she carry on Miss Graham's work with that league? In a word, how would the money affect Claire herself?

It was a fresh and very interesting subject of discussion for her family; but, strangely enough, none of them thought of how the money might affect her in one particular direction.

Then very soon the news flew round.

Roddy had announced that the divorce proceedings must be stopped. He said that he had changed his mind, and he called upon Claire immediately to withdraw her petition.

Her advisers could not believe in such baseness—that greed of money should make him go back on his bargain in so dastardly a fashion. He had not only consented to the divorce, he had proposed it himself. How could he have the brazen effrontery to attempt to retain the wife he had ruined and deserted, now that she had again become a valuable asset?

Yet it was so. Having already broken his promise that he would return to America, after living for half a year on the money Claire had given him and anything he could make by betting, he was here in London, large, bold, shameless, plainly determined to cause trouble.

But what trouble could he cause? Why should they be afraid of him? His sting had been drawn; his own admission of infidelity and the necessary proofs of it were

in their hands; he was powerless to prevent the divorce. It was an impudent bluff. It was the most flagrantly vile attempt at blackmail; and it must be treated with the contempt that it deserved. Leonard Joyce and her other counsellors were firm as to this. Claire must utterly repudiate the possibility of any further dealings or traffickings with her husband. She must defy him and denounce him. Not another penny should he ever get from her. Above all, she must show that she was not afraid of him.

Nevertheless, despite of this good advice, he was in fact frightening her and unnerving her. He wrote her letters; he demanded to see her. He warned her that he was not to be trifled with, and prophesied that she would be sorry if she refused to fall in with his changed views.

Then after more family talk it was reluctantly decided that it might be best for Claire to see her husband in the presence of Leonard Joyce; and one afternoon Roddy came by appointment to the house in Hans Place.

At sight of him, Claire felt an almost superstitious dread. In her new frame of thought, weakened and torn again by recent grief, she felt as if he represented the spirit of evil itself, large and menacing, suddenly arisen before her to block the opened path to peace.

He had grown fatter; he was loud and flashy as to attire, with a cunning smile on his ugly lips; not sleepy and dull, but alert—to the extent that the men one sees playing cards in race trains are alert—quick to take advantage of every opportunity, and watchful for the blunders of their opponents.

With an affectation of confident friendliness, he congratulated Claire on her improved appearance. "I told you you'd soon recover your good looks, didn't I?"

Then tackled by Leonard Joyce, he doggedly repeated that he had changed his mind. Circumstances had changed. After all, the last word was with him.

"No, it isn't," said Leonard angrily. "You've had your last word. The word is with Claire now."

"Then let her speak for herself."

"Why don't you say at once that after spending one fortune of Claire's you hope for the chance of spending another?"

"You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, Joyce."

And with raised voices the two men spoke to each other violently.

Claire's heart turned faint and sick. This noise and violence, to which she had listened for so many years, was Roddy's very atmosphere; wherever he went he recreated it. His presence here profaned the whole house, soiled the cleanness and prettiness of this room in which every familiar object had felt the touch of the kind dead friend who hated him. It seemed to her that all the old degradation was being brought back into her life, and that nothing now would ever really free her from his evil power.

"What do you suppose you can do?" asked Leonard, less loudly but with unabated wrath.

"To begin with, I can defend the action. There are many things I can do. You'll find out in good time. Perhaps Claire can make some sort of guess already. Anyhow, she knows me—she knows that I don't talk through my hat."

Presently he swore at Leonard, and there was another noisy altercation. Then he tried to ignore Leonard altogether, and would speak to Claire only. Then he shrugged his shoulders and assumed another manner.

"Look here, Joyce. We are not children. Can't we talk like sensible grown-up people? You must see you make it difficult for me. There are things that I wanted to say to Claire alone."

"Yes, but you are not going to be alone with her."

Roddy shrugged his shoulders again. "All right. Have

it your own way. But at any rate give me a fair chance."

Then he said that it was absurd and childish to assume that he ought to disregard Claire's change of circumstances. When he agreed that a divorce was advisable they were so very hard up that a joint household was no longer possible. Now that difficulty at least was removed. If Claire would consent to let bygones be bygones and make a fresh start with him, he would do his best to wipe out the memory of past grievances. That was for Claire to decide. He would not press her, if she did not feel agreeable, to begin the experiment at once. But he insisted that she should immediately stay all proceedings for divorce. Then, when the petition was withdrawn, they could quietly discuss things and arrive at some arrangement that would be satisfactory to both of them.

"Very nice indeed," said Leonard mockingly. "Anything else? Don't stint yourself. Give your orders."

"Listen to me, Claire. If he won't keep quiet, don't notice what he says. I appeal to you—to your sense of justice too. Do you remember what you told me last time we met? You owned that in our married life you had been every bit as much to blame as I."

"I'll swear that Claire never said anything so ridiculously untrue."

"Claire, attend to me. Never mind him. Didn't you say it?"

"Yes, I think perhaps I did. Only——"

"There you are, Joyce. Perhaps that'll make you hold your tongue half a minute."

"But, Roddy, that was after we had agreed to the divorce. And I didn't for a moment mean what you now——"

"You said it and you meant it. And you said more than that. I had confessed my faults. And you said you

knew that if I had had another sort of woman for my wife I should have had a better chance."

"But, Roddy——"

"Claire, I ask you to let me have the chance. In my eyes, you *are* another sort of woman now. You've learnt many lessons—you're much older—more experienced. And I swear that I will be a different sort of man. Anyhow, give me a fair trial. Don't listen to what other people tell you to do. Act for yourself—be your own true self;" and he would have taken her hand, but she recoiled from him. "Don't answer me now. Think it over. I warn you——" and he gave her a very ugly smile—"I warn you, Claire, that if you refuse to consider it, I shall draw my own conclusions. There. Think it over carefully."

But Leonard said that he answered for her now and at once. Roddy might take her answer away with him. It was an emphatic negative.

The hateful conversation ended with a renewal of bluster and threats. Roddy threatened Claire with unimaginable reprisals. He gave her a week to withdraw her petition. If she remained obdurate, in a week from now he would take measures to make her sorry for herself.

And Leonard, again answering for her, told him he might do his damnedest.

After this interview Claire's nerves were shaken, and in dread lest Roddy should come again and force an entrance to the house, she went to stay with Leonard and Emily for a little while. Leonard told her that by reason of her petition she was legally protected from molestation by Roddy, and talked of getting an order from the Court if Roddy dared to show his nose in Hans Place. He urged Claire to shake off all fears of Roddy; for they were quite baseless.

But Claire was afraid of Roddy. She knew him better than other people. She wished her advisers to buy him off; she said that since it was her money that he really

wanted, let him have her money, if only he would leave her in peace.

This, of course, was not to be thought of: her friends intended that she should have peace and the money too.

Then it became known that Roddy had successfully applied for the removal of the suit to the defended list. And it was further known that the solicitors now acting for Roddy were Messrs. Glover and Stock, a firm exceedingly famous for their long-established and successful connection with the divorce courts.

"Sharp devils," said Mr. Collie junior. "They know the thing from A to Z. So we mustn't let them catch us tripping."

At this time there was another family assembly at Mr. Collie's office. Claire, brought there by Leonard and Emily, again suggested that Roddy should be given money, as much money as he wanted, to make him desist from opposing the divorce; and she put before them a letter from Roddy, in which he told her it was still open to her to withdraw the petition and advised her so to do before it was too late.

But no one could patiently contemplate yielding to Roddy's assault. Cave in to such an out-and-out scoundrel? Oh, no. It would be consenting to blackmail. It would be worse—it would be collusion. It would be conspiring to defeat the ends of justice.

Mrs. Gilmour shook her head as firmly as anybody present. Mrs. Gilmour had been brought here by Uncle Derek, because old Mr. Collie considered it necessary to explain to her that he was now compelled to modify his pledge to carry through everything without names being mentioned. Naturally an undefended case was not the same thing as a hotly contested action. Although it was difficult to see what possible defence Captain Vaughan could set up, nevertheless, if he really meant fighting, some slight publicity seemed inevitable. To shirk this event-

uality would, Mr. Collie thought, be playing into the enemy's hands; for he himself felt convinced that Captain Vaughan, not having a leg to stand on, would soon ignominiously collapse and abandon his defence, whatever it might be. The whole thing, Mr. Collie thought, was done to scare them. He therefore implored Mrs. Gilmour to brace herself against the discomfort of a few mild newspaper notices and to stand firmer than ever.

Much to the contentment both of Mr. Collie and Leonard Joyce, Mrs. Gilmour rose to the occasion very handsomely. She said that, after all she had now learnt of her son-in-law's shameless duplicity, she would suffer any annoyance rather than bow her neck under his yoke or let Claire bow her neck either.

Thus the whole family agreed to stand firm. All were in arms and resolute against the common enemy.

"It is a very curious thing," said Uncle Derek, everything being settled, "and it shows what a truly remarkable woman Agnes was, that she exactly foretold the danger which we are now called to meet. Yes, when she first came to me to point out the desirability of a divorce, she confided her intention of leaving all her property to our dear Claire. And she said the divorce *must* be pushed through; because were she to die and Clair come into the money before she got her divorce, Roddy would certainly try to upset the apple-cart. You know her quaint, picturesque way of expressing herself. Now we see"—and old Derek beamed round upon everybody—"we see how accurate was her forecast. I believe it was her native perspicuity and not any premonition of death that made her so anxious—although she may have guessed at her state and bravely concealed it. But is it not a pity that things should have so fallen out? Claire might be already in a position to laugh at Roddy—you know what I mean, Claire—we might all snap our fingers at him, but for these intolerable, these overwhelming delays, these——"

"The Law's delays, my dear sir," said old Collie huffily. "I hope you do not suppose that they have been otherwise than unavoidable, or in any way attributable to lack of energy in this office."

"Nay, nay," said old Derek, with courteous haste. "Of course not. Just as you say, the Law's delay. There is a classical quotation to that effect, is there not?"

About this time, too, Claire heard that Basil Everett was again in London. They had exchanged a few words on the day of the funeral and since then they had written to each other; but although Claire was anxious to see him, a series of unlucky chances had kept them apart. He had called at the house in Hans Place while Claire was staying with the Joyces; then when she was back at her own house he had gone to look for her at the Joyces'; and once again he had come to Hans Place, only to miss her again.

Emily had told him everything concerning Roddy's iniquitous change of front, and she reported to Claire that she had never known anybody so indignant. "He looked as if he would like to go away and murder Roddy." She also said that she remembered him as quite a young man, and he was then a most odious prig, but now he was so greatly improved that she began to understand why Aunt Agnes had always made such a fuss about him. "We sat talking for I should think an hour and a half, and I really *liked* him. If possible, I shall get Leonard to cultivate him. However, there won't be much opportunity if he is sent to Egypt."

And Emily spoke of something she had read in a newspaper saying that Colonel Everett would probably succeed Lord Ashbury at Cairo when that talented official gave over the diplomatic and military work that he was doing so admirably.

Now, late one morning, Claire received a telegram from Basil asking if he might call upon her early in the after-

noon. But once more chance was against her; for her whole afternoon was already engaged. When the telegram arrived she was on the point of going out to meet Uncle Derek. The good old chap, actuated by his usual kindliness, had persuaded her to let him give her a little treat for the benefit of her health. She was to lunch with him very quietly at one of his innumerable clubs; then he would take her to see some new war pictures, and after that he would give her tea and escort her home. All this, he declared, was a strictly permissible relaxation in spite of her mourning; it would do her good, and if poor Aunt Agnes knew what he proposed he was sure she would wish Claire to say Yes. Claire said Yes. Whatever her own inclinations, she could not have said No without wounding his feelings.

But now she wished that Uncle Derek had chosen any other day than this.

She had a special reason, apart from any others, for wanting to see Basil. After vainly searching through her aunt's papers for any memorandum or letter, such as kind people so often leave behind them, expressing sacred, though not legally binding wishes as to gifts to servants or friends, Claire had come upon a packet neatly tied and sealed, with this superscription: "*For Basil Everett. To be put into his own hands,*" and a date. From the size and character of the little parcel she guessed that it contained one of Aunt Agnes's miniatures or a small picture. But Claire was surprised and worried by the date that Aunt Agnes had written beneath the direction. It was so very recent—after their visit to Brighton. Did this mean that when Aunt Agnes packed up her gift or souvenir she knew that her days were numbered? Or was it merely something that she was putting aside for Basil without any intention that it should be held back till after her death? Perhaps she had meant herself to put it into Basil's hands, and had written those words only to identify

the parcel among all the other things in the drawer where it lay. Claire was very anxious to set this doubt at rest by learning what was really in the parcel and talking to Basil about her aunt.

She did not answer the telegram. Suddenly the idea had occurred to her that she could easily deliver the packet to-day; so she took it with her, and immediately on her arrival at the club she asked Uncle Derek if, after luncheon, he would mind going with her to Colonel Everett's rooms for a few minutes on their way to the pictures. Of course the old fellow did not mind. He trotted away to the telephone, and returning presently said that Colonel Everett was at his rooms and would expect them at a quarter to three.

"Tell me about him," he said, as they sat down to luncheon. And Claire, willingly enough, talked of this great friend of her aunt's; telling Uncle Derek also of his unfailing kindness to herself.

Uncle Derek had seen that paragraph about Basil's future appointment, but he said that this would not mean an immediate departure, because according to his own information Lord Ashbury was not likely to give up the post till next year.

At a quarter to three Claire and her elderly escort were approaching the corner out of St. James's Square, and just before reaching the corner Uncle Derek paused.

"Those pictures, Claire, are at a private gallery in Bond Street; but before going in to your friend I will just verify the number by consulting my little tablets. My memory is not what it was. Perhaps you would like Colonel Everett to accompany us. By all means ask him if you—— Oh, Claire! Good gracious me. Oh, dear, oh dear."

Uncle Derek, consulting his tablets, had made a terrible discovery. His eyes grew round, and he stared at Claire

in consternation and then looked wildly across the Square towards the large buildings of Pall Mall.

At 3 p.m. to-day there was a special general meeting at another of his clubs, and he had forgotten all about it. He was on the committee too.

"Claire, what can I do?" he said, after explaining his distress.

"Why, of course, you must leave me, Uncle Derek, and go to your meeting."

"Then what will *you* do?"

Claire hesitated a moment before she answered. "I shall go to see Colonel Everett, and then make my way home."

"Nay, nay, you must at least let me give you tea. How can you ever forgive me for such a blunder?"

But Claire assured the old chap that it did not matter in the least; and with more profuse apologies he trotted off towards Pall Mall.

There was nobody in the stone hall, and Claire, turning her back on the lift, had gone half-way up the first flight of stairs when the porter came out and called to her.

"Lift, miss. Oh, I beg your pardon, ma'am. For the moment I didn't recognize you. You've often been here for the Colonel, haven't you?"

He wore the same apple-green coat with the two wound stripes, and as he took her up in the lift he talked to her as an old friend. She dreaded lest he should ask for news of her daughter or her aunt. But he did not do so.

"There. You know your way, ma'am. The door facing you at the end."

"But, Mrs. Vaughan, where is Mr. Harpington?" said Basil. He had opened the door himself. "You are not alone, are you?"

As she looked at his face, she saw as well as surprise what seemed like a slight embarrassment. She explained

why she was unaccompanied; then, as she stood in the middle of the room with the parcel in her hand, she felt that she was flushing. She had hesitated just now, thinking of common and conventional ideas; but surely he of all people would not entertain a thought that there was any impropriety in her coming here alone to accomplish this simple task. She struggled against a stupid and unworthy embarrassment; and meeting his eyes with her old candid steadiness she saw nothing but the grave kindness that she knew so well. It was all right. He was himself—different from and higher than common men.

But a fresh and far more painful constraint fell upon her as she told him of the packet and, fulfilling her duty, put it into his hands.

"Thank you. How kind of her. How kind of you to bring it. Shall I open it now or wait till after you are gone?"

"I—I don't know. I wanted to ask you—But perhaps you had better wait."

She was thinking of something that had never occurred to her till this moment. Suppose there were matters in the packet that concerned herself? A letter? Suppose that Aunt Agnes had written him a letter—a message to come to him after her death, telling him the things she had said to Claire; telling him of her great wish?

"Just as you like," he said. "I will do whatever you tell me."

"Then open it, please. And if there is a letter I will ask you not to read it now but later on."

"Very well."

She had spoken firmly, determined to shake off the doubt and the discomfort that oppressed her; and she turned from him and moved away.

"One moment, Mrs. Vaughan," he said hastily. "Don't sit by the window, please. I'll tell you why directly. Won't you sit here, by the fire?"

While speaking he himself had gone towards the window. He drew back again, and sitting at a table cut the strings of the parcel and threw open its paper wrappings and examined the contents. They were photographs of Claire; perhaps half a dozen of them—"Claire as a little child," "Claire, aged fourteen." "Claire, aged twenty." The blood mounted to his forehead, his whole face softened and brightened with pleasure; then, glancing shyly at Claire, he refolded the papers. She was not looking at him; in any event, from where she sat she would not have been able to see the photographs.

"There is no letter," he said. "No business matter at all. It is only some mementoes that your aunt knew I would like to have;" and he carried the packet across the room and put it in a writing-desk.

Then he came to the fireplace, and stood there while she looked up at him with questioning eyes. But the sense of constraint was on both of them now, on him more heavily than on her. He could not tell her what she had brought him, and yet obviously she must want to know. She would think his silence unnatural. When she spoke of what Uncle Derek had said, and what she now herself thought, about Aunt Agnes having a premonition of death, he answered her nervously, almost inattentively. When she asked a question as to his rumoured appointment, he scarcely knew what he was replying.

"You would be away for a long time?" she said, in the sweet, deep tone that he loved more than any music he had ever heard; and he could only say stupidly that he was not gone yet and perhaps would never go. He did not feel keen to go.

"But it would be splendid work, wouldn't it? The sort of work you would like? However much your friends may miss you, they cannot wish you not to go."

He moved abruptly and looked away from her. The sadness in her voice as she said those last words, the droop

of her neck, the submissive gentleness of her whole attitude, pierced his heart with a sweetly burning pain.

"Everybody is very kind," he murmured. "Yes, it's quite a good job. Of course I don't know if I shall get it in the end, but they have told me to prepare myself for it."

And as though invincibly drawn back, his eyes returned to her face.

"I will go now;" and she rose from the low chair. And they stood quite still for a moment, looking at each other helplessly, as if not knowing what more to say, although reading the trouble in each other's breast.

Indeed there was nothing that he might say to her. He wanted to say that there was no splendid work in all the world except to love her and to serve her. He wanted to tell her that he had no hope in life except the hope of winning her. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her that he would never let her go again, that he would not wait upon the caprices of destiny any longer, that his love was too great for the law's delay. But all these were things that he could not say and she could not hear.

Claire watching his face felt suddenly that all her trouble was gone. She had understood. It had been but a momentary pause; and yet, brief as it was, there had been time in it to flood her heart with tranquil trustful happiness.

"I must go," she said again; and in the dark softness of her eyes he saw now that it did not really matter whether he spoke or remained silent.

It was true, as she herself had said in her secret thoughts. Between these two there was no need of words.

"Mrs. Vaughan, wait a minute before you go." The constraint had gone utterly, and he spoke in his easy pleasant natural manner. "Rather an odd thing has happened to me. But first tell me, did you notice anyone down below when you came in?"

"No, only the porter."

"Only the porter."

He had gone to the window, and, standing behind the muslin curtain he cautiously looked down into the street.

"Yes, hang the fellow's impudence, he is there still."

Then he told her that for the last three days a man had been hanging about the house and evidently watching it; and that he had seen this same man yesterday at the Army and Navy Stores and later when he left the Travellers' Club after dinner.

"From which I deduce, Mrs. Vaughan, that the fellow is watching *me*," said Basil smiling. "I am being *shadowed*."

"But how extraordinary." and Claire had a shiver of fear. Could it be that Basil was in danger because of all those political missions—his journeys into Germany and other comquered territories? An agent sent to dog his steps? An assassin?

Basil Everett laughed cheerfully when she spoke of such possibilities.

"Oh, no, you altogether exaggerate my importance. No, he's not an assassin, but he is going to get a kicking if he isn't careful. Only, meanwhile, it struck me that if he saw you come in he need not see you go out. One never knows what annoyance—An unpleasant idea occurred to me. I won't trouble you with that. But, if you don't mind, I think it might be as well for me to take you out by the back door instead of the front door. There's an entrance in the other street, you know."

They did what he suggested. After reconnoitring, he returned to the room, and then led her down a service staircase at the back of the building, through a passage past offices and kitchens, and out into the open air. They met no one on the way; and Basil, looking round as they emerged from the other street, saw that no on had observed them there.

"My friend in front," he said, laughing, "probably

doesn't know that I have this bolt-hole available. May I walk with you a little way?"

"No, I'll say good-bye, I think, now."

"Have you things to do?"

"I don't quite know what I am going to do."

She did not know. She turned eastward; and presently an impulse took her into the National Gallery, where she wandered through the rooms looking at the glorious old pictures without seeing them. For a long time she sat with folded hands upon a divan, dreaming. She was happier, far happier than she had believed could be ever possible, and she asked herself was it wrong to feel this joy.

Then, after an hour or so, she had tea at a confectioner's shop, and as the evening was very fine walked through the streets. She was deep in the dream, almost unconscious of surroundings, walking without sense of direction, but feeling that her footsteps to-day and every day to come would lead her surely nearer to the realization of this great hope. Lamplight, darkness, and then again more light—as she sauntered on the voice of dead Aunt Agnes sounded in the dream. "He will make up to you for all that you have gone through. . . . He loves you with such a pure and noble love."

It was late when she reached home.

CHAPTER XXIX

RODDY and those cruelly keen solicitors of his were at work. A whisper reached Leonard Joyce that Roddy's defence would take the form of a counter-attack; young Collie felt sure that he intended to institute a cross suit; Mr. Collie senior did not apprehend the likelihood of this move, in the absence of all possible materials; Emily, hearing about it, did not understand what was meant and craved for explanations of technical terms. Then, before one could draw breath, the thing was an accomplished fact.

Roddy had filed a petition praying for the dissolution of his marriage on the grounds of Claire's adultery. He cited Basil Everett as co-respondent, and specified dates for alleged acts of misconduct as having occurred in Brighton and in London.

After all, it was a well-established move in the game. He was, of course, playing for a stale-mate, which from his point of view meant victory. Although himself guilty, if Claire's conduct were not free from all reproach she would not be entitled to relief; for the Court closely scrutinizes the hands held up in prayer before it, and must find them quite clean or it cannot show mercy. So Roddy, while now himself pretending to ask for a divorce, was trying to take the most unscrupulous, the vilest means to render his marriage indissoluble.

The Gilmour family staggered beneath the violence of the brutal blow. For a little while they were like children who have been hurt and who are holding their breath before they begin to make a noise. Then the indignation burst forth voluminously. Was it conceivable? Did the law really allow it? What was libel, what was slander,

if such an outrage could be committed with impunity? To accuse Claire, of all women in the world—this gentle, long-suffering creature, against whom even in the pride of her beauty there had never been one whisper; Claire, who as a young and ill-treated wife had passed through every kind of temptation, dignified and calm, not even seeming to be conscious that she was admired, courted and desired; Claire, who from childhood till now had been chastity personified! What must be her feelings under such a foul and unmerited accusation! But in truth Claire during this first warmth of anger and disgust was temporarily almost forgotten. The assault upon her reputation was an assault upon the reputation of the whole family. Every one of them now felt directly implicated, all were burning to avenge the general insult.

While they talked Basil Everett had acted. He could not remain altogether passive; his anger and scorn were so fiercely strong that he must do something, and the thing that he did was injudicious, although its results were probably of no consequence at all.

With a soldier's instinct he directly sought out the enemy. In the midst of his rage he could not believe that this fellow Vaughan was such an utterly conscienceless rascal as his methods indicated; he thought that if he could get hold of him as man to man he must be able to make some impression. Without any difficulty he attained sight and speech of him; and alone, face to face with him, in a small back room of that large second-class club to which Roddy had always belonged, Basil swore to the innocence of himself and Claire, and appealed to Roddy's last faint sense of decency or manly virtue not to bring shame upon her.

"Just so," said Roddy, with a scowl. "Then it'll be no trouble to either of you to prove it before a judge and jury."

"We'll prove it easily enough, but I want her to be saved from so degrading a necessity."

"Yes, you want a great deal," said Roddy hotly; "you want what you're not going to get. Oh, I know all about you, Everett—You're the faithful friend, aren't you? When I was out of the way, you were very useful, weren't you?"

And at last he plainly showed the character of his mind.

"Look here," he said brutally. "Perhaps she *is* innocent in deed—but she isn't in intention. I've seen the plot clearly enough—for longer too than either of you guessed. If she can get away from me, she is to reward you for your faithfulness and all your dancing attendance on her. Do you deny it? You are to be married as soon as she is free to marry."

"I swear on my honour that I have never said a word to her to suggest it."

Roddy grinned contemptuously and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, you've been too delicate. But she understands all right, doesn't she? She'll be ready for you when the time comes to lead her to the altar. Do you deny that's what you're aiming at? Do you deny it's your full intention?"

And Basil could not deny.

"Well, that doesn't suit my book. She's my wife—and I have decided to keep her."

Then Basil poured out scorn upon him; saying those unpremeditated things that a high-spirited but cultivated man does not anticipate that he would ever be likely to say until he has heard them sounding in his own voice. He had sufficient control of himself still not to pass from words to blows, although every instinct was clamouring for this further lapse and hope whispered that a blow from Roddy might inevitably compel it. But Roddy kept his coarse fists down, and only used his snarling tongue. To any one who heard the two of them it must have sounded like a row on a racecourse between a gentleman punter and a blackguard welsher. At last the gentleman walks

away with a gesture of contempt, and the tout stands and blasphemes or threatens more and more loudly as the distance increases between them.

The initial preparations of the two suits continued; and Claire's friends and relatives went on talking. But the family talk now was changed from the talk of an easy past; there was no pleasure in the unceasing debates. This little game of Claire's divorce had become deadly serious; they were playing for high stakes. The talkers themselves looked different, were, in fact, different. Mrs. Gilmour, as if awakened from a slumber of years, no longer wandered here and there or discoursed at large; she was concentrated, eager, speaking strangely to the point; when she said that she suffered grievously, and must always suffer unless her daughter's honour were vindicated, it was quite obviously the fact and not a mere fancy. Even Sir John, the supine baronet, came up from Liverpool to join in this new sort of talk.

It was like the old talk only in one respect, that it led nowhere. "Is there not any way of stopping him? Do you think he himself intends to go on with it?" They asked one another such questions as these at the beginning of a discussion, and then an hour or two later, at its end, asked the very same questions.

"Leonard, what do *you* think? Will he have the audacity to carry it through? Don't you think that Mr. Collie was right, and that he'll collapse before the trial?"

"I echo your doubt, my dear Emily," said old Derek. "I only wish we knew for certain exactly what he means to do."

But Claire knew too well what he meant to do, had known from the day on which she heard of his attack upon her good name. He meant to separate her for ever from the man she loved. And fatally, irrevocably, he was doing it.

She could never marry Basil now. To marry him would be to admit the truth of the charge against her, after having refuted it in open court. Once free, and her character cleared, she might marry anybody else alive, but not Basil. The one man on earth who could give her consolation and wipe out all her pain and grief was lost to her.

Basil would tell her that she was wrong to believe this, would beg her to brave the opinion of the world, would say that what the world thought was nothing to him. But she knew that she was right. She knew that for his own dear sake she must never change her mind, never, never yield to his pleading. She must say good-bye to this, as she had done in turn to every other hope that had ever filled her heart with transient joy.

Thinking about it day after day her sadness deepened while her resolution grew stronger. In imagination she could hear people talking about her as Basil Everett's wife. "Yes," they would say, "don't you remember? He was the co-respondent in the case. The husband failed to prove anything, but their marriage shows how well-founded were his suspicions. . . . Do you suppose Colonel Everett *wanted* to marry her, or was just *caught*? . . . I should think it was the last thing a man in his position would want to do, but no doubt he felt he could not do anything else. . . . She could not have been a *nice* woman—I mean, apart from morality—or she would not have accepted the sacrifice. For she has ruined his career, of course."

No, that should not happen. Basil must not have that kind of wife. He must go on with his work untrammelled, and live to thank his poor, unhappy Claire for giving him a little pain in order to save him from a great regret.

One day early in the new year she was invited to Hague House, and went there, not knowing that she was to meet a

family assembly, gathered together in a manner curiously similar to that long bygone council which considered her fate when she first engaged herself to Roddy.

During the last week certain members of the family had given way to panic fear. The talk was so agitating now that nerves became unstrung. Every day brought fresh disturbing whispers. Mr. Collie junior had said that those people, Glover and Stock, were absolute fiends in getting up a case; it was known in Collie's office that they had "got hold of all those servants at Brighton and other places;" old Collie suddenly expressed gloomy views of the divorce court itself as an arena. He said he doubted if you could always be sure of obtaining justice there. He spoke ominously of the divorce court atmosphere. Emily was continually learning new facts with regard to the intimacy between Colonel Everett and her sister. She was severely condemnatory as to his thoughtless conduct. "I must say, he appears to have hung on in a very compromising way;" and so forth. Uncle Derek said he thought that Everett as a man of the world should have been more circumspect. Even Leonard Joyce wavered.

And suppose that Claire—always the most unworldly person—had to a certain extent committed herself. Suppose the poor girl had done imprudent things. Suppose she had been really foolish—"You understand what I mean? Leonard knows that I simply hate saying it. But we are faced with such appalling risks now that one cannot hesitate. Suppose——"

"My dear Emily," said old Derek, with benign tolerance. "If so, who could blame her?"

The family were afraid. Hence its assembly on this dull foggy afternoon; with Mrs. Gilmour deputed, as the only possible spokeswoman, "to sound poor Claire" for them, and then bring her before them so that they might tell her their latest opinion.

Mrs. Gilmour abhorred her task, but could not recoil from it. She was always affectionate and kind to Claire in these days, and every time they embraced Claire could feel that she was not only kissing her mother, but that the person kissed fully remembered the fact.

Mrs. Gilmour received her in the morning-room, and without any preamble came to the point.

She said their advisers considered that Roddy would still be only too glad to stay his hand if Claire would stay hers; and she earnestly appealed to Claire not to go on unless absolutely sure that she was safe.

"I shall try to understand—I *shall* understand—if you tell me you went further with Colonel Everett than, of course, you intended. Heaven knows you have excuses. But it would be a thousand times better to stop the whole thing than to let the story be publicly disclosed."

"Mother!"

Claire had been looking at her with large, wondering eyes, and the exclamation came like a cry of pain. It was intolerably bitter to learn that even her nearest relations could doubt her innocence.

"Mother, don't *you* believe in me?"

"Claire, my dearest girl, I *do* believe. I have never done otherwise. Only they made me ask you;" and she threw her arms round Claire's neck and kissed her with fervent affection. "Forgive me, Claire. I do indeed believe in you."

Then she led Claire by the hand into the library where the others were waiting for her.

"She is going on," said Mrs. Gilmour firmly, almost triumphantly. "There is no reason why we should give in. She *must* go on and clear herself."

And Claire herself told them that nothing on earth would make her withdraw her petition now. How could she, since she was innocent, and withdrawal would imply guilt? As she stood there, tall and straight, with her

head high and a proudly gentle smile on her lips while she looked at one and another of them, it was impossible not to see, not to know that she was innocent. Indeed, none doubted her any more.

Then her eyes clouded and her lips trembled, and she said something so touching that all were moved by it.

"If—if I didn't mind for my own sake, I—I couldn't do it—for Gladys's sake."

Uncle Derek brought out a brown silk handkerchief and blew his nose; and Sir Leonard came across the room impulsively and shook her hand.

"Claire—you're a brick. Don't be afraid. I promise that we won't let you down."

He never lost confidence again, and he often spoke of the impression made upon him by Claire's aspect as she stood facing them that afternoon. He said he relied on her making a precisely similar impression when she stood in the witness-box. "The jury will hear her and see her, and they won't be hoodwinked." In reply to these assurances from Leonard, old Mr. Collie continued to twaddle about the divorce court atmosphere. He even talked of it to Claire during one of the innumerable interviews at the office, taking quite unnecessary pains to explain exactly what he meant.

"I do not, of course, mean the stuffiness and want of air. I mean the moral atmosphere. That will be our greatest danger—the tacit presumption that all parties who get there are guilty; the taking it for granted by everybody, judges, counsel, clerks, ushers, spectators——"

"Yes, yes—but you forget we shall have a jury too," said Leonard, cutting him short impatiently. "What's the good of trying to scare her?"

"That's right, father," said Dick Collie. "You keep up your spirits, Mrs. Vaughan."

"By all means," said the old gentleman. "I had not the faintest intention——"

Leonard had told Claire that it would be very inadvisable for her to be seeing Basil Everett, or even to be writing him letters. Leonard was in close touch with him, and if Claire had any communication to make it should be promptly passed on. But now, as the time for the hearing of the case drew near, she asked Leonard to arrange a meeting between them. She said that she must see him once more. Leonard was very kind to her in all things, and accordingly, yielding to her wish although disapproving of it, he brought Basil Everett to his own house. Emily kept out of the way with ostentatious care while Claire and the visitor met and conversed for a little while in her front drawing-room.

It was at this meeting that Basil for the first time spoke to her of his love. He combated that resolution of hers with ardent force. He said that as to spoiling his life, the only real way to spoil it would be by her refusing to marry him. He cared nothing for his career, for the ostracism of diplomatic circles, or the ill-natured gossip of vulgar fools. He said all that she had expected him to say, but he did not in the least convince her that she was wrong.

"Claire, my dearest, it isn't true that people would fight shy of us."

"You know it's true, really, Basil."

"I don't. But if it *is* true, there are places we could go to where it would not matter."

"Basil, this is good-bye. Say good-bye to me."

But he would not say that word, and he vowed there should be no Good-bye between them.

"Not unless you told me, Claire, you didn't care for me."

"Why should I tell you that?" And she said how she loved him. "Too much, Basil dear, to be selfish. You are the only unselfish man I have ever known."

Emily, keeping out of the way, saw him go down the stairs sooner than she had anticipated. She thought, more strongly than Leonard, that this was very injudicious; but she was kind and uncritical to Claire, sobbing all alone in the front drawing-room.

Everybody was kind to her—kinder and kinder as the time drew closer. Mrs. Gilmour insisted that she should come to stay at Hague House, so that all their friends might see plainly that the family were upholding her cause. And by the usual means she procured the insertion of a paragraph in the *Morning Post* and another paper announcing to the whole world that "Mrs. Roderick Vaughan is staying with her mother, Mrs. Gilmour, at Hague House, Hague Street, S.W." She felt that this was like pinning her colours to the mast. Desperate ills need desperate cures. In truth she had travelled far mentally from her position on that afternoon of a year ago when she made her famous proviso: Not a mention of the name in the public press!

So Claire slept once more in her own old room, and dreamed of the past as often as of the future. She did not entertain, and indeed had never entertained, a single doubt as to the result of the case. Why should she fear, being innocent? Only, more and more clearly in all those interviews at the solicitor's offices, she had come to understand the hatefulness of the ordeal that she was to pass through. And more, perhaps, than almost any woman who had passed through it before her, she dreaded and shrank from its ugliness.

Two or three days before the end of the delay a final consultation was held at the chambers of her leading counsel, Sir James Holt. In the quiet spacious room there was ample accommodation for all the people gathered there without any sense of crowding. The company comprised Claire and Leonard, together with Emily, who had insisted on coming "to keep Claire in countenance;" both

Mr. Collies, and their managing clerk; Mr. Eaton, that clever junior; and Sir James's devil, a Mr. Blake, who said loudly that there ought to have been many more present, and that he himself would go and see the co-respondent's silk, or bring him there by the ear if Sir James wished.

The talk was very business-like. Everything was thrashed out. There was much hunting for and examination of weak spots. During these processes Claire seemed for the most part forgotten; and she sat on the outer skirts of the circle, looking at the pleasant view from the windows—the Temple gardens, the mulberry-red brick-work of the old houses, and the river seen through the leafless branches of trees as it flashed bright and gay in the afternoon sunshine.

Then all at once Sir James Holt invited her to draw in, and gave her a prominent position on the other side of his table. Sir James was large and handsome, with silver-grey hair and penetrating eyes. He had a polished, man-of-the-world manner, and a pleasing voice. He inspired confidence. He said everything was settled, and he only wanted to say a few words about her evidence. He told her presently all about the leader on the other side.

He said that this Mr. Moberley was of the old school—an old-fashioned style of advocate. "Full of tricks. A regular actor, too. His speech will be pompous, heavy;" and he looked round for confirmation.

"Yes," said Leonard. "Flowery, pompous ass!"

"Well, no," said Sir James, "he's not an ass. No, I am afraid we mustn't think of him as an ass. . . . But now, Mrs. Vaughan, it's in cross-examination you and he will make acquaintance. I want to prepare you, if possible, for his manner. He likes to browbeat witnesses. He may shout at you, slap his papers, and all that. But you mustn't let yourself be upset by that. That's a bogey. If you hesitate, he'll try to hustle you. Don't

be hustled. Keep perfectly calm and collected. I shall be there, of course, and I'll do all I can for you."

Then Sir James, trying to forecast the line of Mr. Moberley's cross-examination, asked her a great many questions—the sort of questions, as well as he could guess, that he thought she might have to answer.

When the visitors had all gone he said to his devil, "That's a fine woman, Blake."

"Yes," said Blake. "Good eyes and a pretty chin. But she's on the thin side—lacking in those full curves and rounded amplitudes that render beauty——"

"Oh, you're too gross," said Sir James, laughing. "I didn't meant what you mean. I wasn't thinking of her looks. I meant she's *fine* in herself. There's something elevated, unusual, about her. Pity she couldn't get a husband who understood her."

CHAPTER XXX

IT was a bright March morning, but very little sunshine penetrated into the deep and narrow court.

The jury had been sworn and were in the box; all the parties to the case were seated at the solicitors' table; in the row of seats immediately behind the table the King's Counsel rustled their gowns and trifled with their papers; behind them sat the junior counsel, and behind them again, in the ascending rows of benches, sat jurymen summoned but not employed, witnesses, hangers-on, and favoured members of the public. In the gallery high over head at the back there was room for more sightseers. All were ready, waiting to begin; only the judgment seat remained empty.

People said that the judge was sitting with the Lord Chief Justice taking *ex parte* motions, but he would be here directly. At ten minutes past ten he had made a tantalizing appearance, passing behind his desk and vanishing through a door. Then one saw him no more, and the hands of the big clock moved slowly on.

People talked to pass the time. In the little knots of men by both doors and along those rearward benches one heard a buzz of conversation.

"I'm nearer fifty than forty, yes, I am. Forty-six" . . . "Oh, I'm fifty-five. Married twenty-three years" . . . "Well, I can beat you there. I was married at twenty." And another voice said proudly, "I can beat you both."

Unemployed special jurymen, together with curious friends who had come to see the fun, listened respectfully as idle habitual visitors to the court chatted with knowledge and authority on legal matters.

"See that big man? That's Moberley, K.C. He's a fair caution, he is. He can shake 'em up when he likes. He's awful on the witnesses—bullies 'em something fearful."

"What's this case that's coming on now? Anything in it?"

"No. Shouldn't think so" . . . "Society people, aren't they?" . . . "Both of 'em up to their necks in it. Six of one and a half a dozen of the other" . . . "Go and spend six or seven thousand pounds when they might just as well have settled it out o' court" . . . "All right for the lawyers, eh?" And on this particular bench the talk flickered out in yawns.

It was a long and enervating wait.

After an hour a juryman in the box got up and called "Time!" Everybody in court rose, thinking that the judge had entered. But it was only a false alarm. The juryman said "Time" again very loudly; and then, when everybody had sat down and he found himself standing all alone, he was stricken with shyness and self-consciousness. Unable to carry things through properly, he muttered his protests in a low voice. "Here we are. I point out. Doing nothing. Our work going on—or standing still." . . . An usher went to him and remonstrated. All this created a little diversion. People were growing very weary.

But the interminable pause gave Claire an opportunity of gradually becoming accustomed to her surroundings. It was not the court in which she had appeared when praying Roddy to return to her. It was deeper, greyer, darker than that other place. Its general aspect reminded one of a library, or perhaps the meeting-place of some new religion, with its bookcases, wood-carving, desks, and pulpit-like enclosures. She was sitting between Leonard Joyce and Dick Collie, who had masses of papers and kept bringing still more from a bag between his knees;

maps too, and tracings, until a barrier of documents built itself on the table in front of her. Beyond Leonard, on her right, there was a man who belonged to the co-respondent; and beyond him, the co-respondent himself. He had smiled at her and spoken to her just now; and she could see his side-face, strong, clear-cut—the face of a soldier among all these soft, mobile faces of the men of law. Far away on her left, sat Roddy with his aiders and abetters. She could see his side-face too—heavy and ugly, the grey hair showing above a fat ear.

She could hear immediately behind her the voice of Sir James Holt, her champion in chief. He touched her on the shoulder once, said something to her, and then resumed his conversation with Mr. Moberley, the leader for the enemy. This fraternizing between the hostile forces surprised her.

Leonard asked her if she really understood the procedure; and by way of killing time told her all about it again. Her suit would be heard first; and since the desertion and mis-conduct were admitted, it would be mere formalities. It would take no time at all. Directly it was over the husband's suit would start. The jury would not at that point be asked to give their answers on the first suit; all the questions would be left to them to answer together when both suits were finished.

Then Leonard got up to stretch himself and knocked down most of Collie's documents. Collie was getting through the time with a blue and a red pencil. "Sorry," said Leonard. "I am looking for your mother, Claire—and Emily. They are right at the back. . . . Now I've got them. Your mother is wearing a lot of black ostrich feathers in her hat, isn't she? . . . Oh, Emily is standing up. I wish she wouldn't do that. Makes her so conspicuous," and Leonard himself sat down.

The hands of the big clock moved slower and slower. It was half-past eleven. Then suddenly the judge reappeared—rapidly crossing the bench—going to change his

red robe, people said. "Yes, it's always a black robe for divorce" . . . "Same idea as the black cap, eh?"

Then a few minutes later the judge returned—in black. There was a cry of "Silence!" and all rose to welcome him and watch him take his seat. He said he was sorry for the delay. But he could not be in two places at once. He had been employed in another court.

Claire recognized him immediately as a man who used to come to her mother's dinner-parties at Hague House years ago. She remembered him quite well—and his wife too, plump little middle-aged woman, with an amethyst necklace. She felt a sense of comfort, if not pleasure, in this recognition; it changed the arbiter of her fate from a mere symbolic figure to a fellow human being.

Now that he had at last arrived, counsel not engaged in her case got up and talked to him about other cases.

Then somebody was reading out something with the name of Vaughan in it—"Issue joined"—and so on; and next moment Sir James Holt was talking in a quiet, conversational style just behind her back, saying he would not take long—"If gentlemen of the jury will give me their attention for a few minutes" . . .

It had begun.

Claire felt a tightening of the nerves, a reaction of the skin, and a catch of the breath, as if she had been plunged into cold water. But she was glad. It was the end of that long torment of waiting—not only these last two years, but the year before that, and all the other years before that.

Very quietly and pleasantly Sir James told the jury how Roddy had left her and how she had wanted him to come back and he would not. He spoke as a man speaks when he stands on a hearth-rug with his back to the fire, narrating something to friends. But when he talked of the letter that Claire had written to her absent husband, there came a vibration in his voice. He said he thought

it would strike everybody as the most pathetically touching letter that a woman ever wrote to a man. He read it aloud; and his voice sounded now as if he was struggling to prevent sympathy from deepening to emotion. When he spoke of Roddy's answer to the letter he startled Claire. She would not have believed that he could speak so sternly. He said he thought most people would designate it as about as brutal an answer as a man ever made to a woman.

However, he did not wish to express any opinions of his own; certainly he did not wish to be grandiloquent. What he did wish was to be very brief. So he resumed his ordinary man-of-the-world manner and went on talking pleasantly and easily; just narrating the facts, and finally saying that with full confidence he asked for the relief to which Claire was entitled.

She looked at the clock. Those hands had been racing. It was nearly one o'clock.

Leonard knocked down more papers and drew her gently by the arm; Basil Everett stood up to let her pass; and she was in the witness-box, swearing to tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

Then, in reply to the courteous questions of Sir James, she deposed to such necessary facts as that she was married to Roddy; that they were husband and wife; that they had thus lived together; that the date on the copy of the marriage certificate was correct; and so on.

She was nervous. The witness-box seemed giddily high above the well of the court, and the walls at a great distance. It was as if the court had expanded into a vast arena. She looked down at a wide, vague sea of faces. When she first spoke, her voice seemed to her harsh and immensely loud; its echoes rolled away like thunder. And her confusion increased when she could not hear what Sir James was saying to her; she had to make him repeat it, and was amazed to find that he was asking her to speak ~~D~~. The judge was making the same request; he was

leaning towards her. He also asked her presently not to speak so fast; evidently he was writing down all her answers.

"Thank you, Mrs. Vaughan," said Sir James. "That is all."

Instinctively she turned to leave the witness-box, but the judge said, "no, no. Remain, please."

Then Mr. Moberley, K.C., rose and said that as the witness was going into the box again he would reserve his cross-examination till then, considering this the most convenient thing to do. Of course he relied on the assurance of his learned friend that he was really going to put her into the box again. Equally of course, this and everything else was all as his lordship pleased. Then Sir James and Mr. Moberley bobbed up and down alternately while the judge talked to them; and a long discussion ensued, during which Claire seemed to be utterly forgotten again. The judge said his great aim and object was economy of time, and he proceeded to tell each of them in turn exactly what he divined as to their intended method of conducting their cases; and both complimented him on his extraordinary good guesses. He seemed gratified; but then he debated with them whether they could not improve on the plan, always with regard to the avoidance of waste of time and yet not running the risk of complication or difficulty.

Claire, no longer the centre of attention, had recovered full composure. From her coign of vantage she looked down reflectively. She saw empty seats. There were not many people in court really, and those who were there seemed bored. They yawned and drifted away while she looked at them. The jury sat huddled and weary, as if they had been there all night and were worn out.

Claire took this chance of studying Mr. Moberley. He was a big, stout man of fifty or more, apparently somewhat short of breath. After talking volubly he grew warm and flushed, and more out of breath, like a man who has been

running. Claire noticed his bushy eyebrows and his broad, coarse cheeks. His diction and utterance were those of an essentially common person who has educated himself with great care but rather late in life. He had a confident smile, as if sure that he was ingratiating himself with everybody present, and there was a sort of sycophantic ecstasy in his way of saying "As your lordship pleases." It was difficult to believe that he could be clever.

The discussion ended, and the court abruptly adjourned. It was half-past one. The judge, having started so late, had sat longer than usual, and he said they must resume business "at two-fifteen *sharp*."

Leonard, after coming to rescue Claire from the witness-box, led her through long corridors to a vaguely crowded room where she could have some food. But she was too excited and anxious to eat.

On the resumption of the hearing another delay occurred. They were kept waiting, not by the judge, but by that juryman who had protested and said "Time." However, the delay was slight, for the defaulting juryman soon arrived, breathless and apologetic, and was hurried into the box, where he trod upon the toes of his companions while the judge reproved him.

This afternoon evidence was given by an hotel manager, a chambermaid, and a night porter, in regard to Roddy's visit to the hotel with an unknown lady. Roddy had to stand up, and the witnesses swore he was the man. Then Claire was told to stand up and they swore she was not the lady.

The progress was very slow. It seemed to Claire that all conspired to make it slow. Nothing was ever taken for granted; the most obvious things had to be inquired into. Moreover, everything that anybody wanted, such as a date, a letter, a book, was always missing; and in the hunt and the tumbling and rummaging of papers the seeds were being sown for rich harvests of future delays. Everybody,

too, said things three or four times instead of once. Often the witness could not hear counsel's questions, counsel could not hear the witness's answer, and the judge could not hear either. Also difficulty was occasioned by counsel framing questions in such a manner that when witnesses heard them best they understood them least. How could it be otherwise than slow?

Yet notwithstanding all this, Claire felt respect, if not admiration for the laborious, painstaking manner of the process by which the facts were searched and sifted out. It was the grinding of a mill that would pass nothing uncrushed. Ignorant as she was, she seemed to know that the judge was competent, acute, and watchful. She understood several times when he pointed out the logical drift of things, and believed that Sir James's profuse thanks for his assistance were genuine. Their slowness began to strengthen her confidence. It made them the more certain to establish the truth. She thought, "Great is the truth; and here, at least, it shall prevail."

Thus at the end of the first day she felt that things had been painful but satisfactory; and as Leonard Joyce hurried her away from the court, she asked him to confirm her impressions.

"Everything is all right, isn't it, Leonard?"

"How do you mean?"

"It has gone in my favour?"

"Well, you know, Claire, it hasn't begun yet," said Leonard.

They had a little dinner-party at Hague House that reminded one of the happy old days. Belton with faultless manners waited on them as if he did not know what was happening, or why his mistress had all the evening papers on each side of her on the table. Emily was gay; old Derek benignantly cheerful. Mrs. Gilmour herself was valiant, staunch, and optimistic.

"*The Pall Mall*," she whispered, "calls it a *Divorce*

Court Tangle." Then, when Belton had gone, she spoke freely. "Claire, I *like* Sir James. He is such a gentleman. And *what* a piece of luck coming before Sir Henry —a very old friend, though I have not seen him in these last years! Did I tell you that Mrs. Drysdale was in court? Wasn't it nice of her to come? She wanted to support you. She sent her love." Then Mrs. Gilmour advised Claire to go to bed and make a long night. "Remember, it is not over yet. You have much before you."

Claire slept better that night than she had done for months. But truly her ordeal was not yet over. She had much before her.

CHAPTER XXXI

"NOW, Claire," whispered Leonard, "sit tight. Remember, this is *his* tale. *Our* tale comes later."

Immediately on the resumption of the hearing, Mr. Moberley had risen to open the husband's case.

He started in a confidential manner, as though the jury had told him they were puzzled all yesterday and had begged him to explain things to them.

He said the marriage had been a love match, and these young people married with every prospect of happiness. They were highly placed, moving in the best society, surrounded with crowds of friends and relations. The future lay in their own hands. But all chance of solid felicity was shipwrecked, as he believed would presently appear, because of the disposition of one party to the contract—the wife. An attempt might be made—he did not know—but he thought quite possibly an attempt might be made to arouse prejudice——

"Why not wait and find out?" said Sir James Holt, rather rudely.

"Please do not interrupt me," said Mr. Moberley, with dignity. "I have shown great courtesy to you, and I must beg you also to restrain yourself."

Then he went on again. He said he had been saying when interrupted—and he paused and looked round at Sir James, as if at a dog that had barked at him; he had been saying that some effort might be essayed to create prejudice in the minds of the gentlemen of the jury by the allegation or insinuation that the husband was influenced by mercenary motives; was less wealthy than the wife. But nothing could be further from a true appreciation of the conditions. So far as fortune went at the time of the marriage, the disparity of fortune was all the other way

round. "Here was a fashionable young man, with the greatest expectations, heir presumptive to his uncle—who was perhaps the richest baronet in England; courted, fêted by all. To use the common phrase, in a position to pick and choose a wife—to throw his handkerchief wherever fancy guided his hand." On the score of birth he was equally the superior; for whereas the wife belonged to the rich commercial classes, the husband traced his descent from what have properly been considered the highest in the realm—the great feudal territorial families.

"But, as I have said, it was a love match—love on both sides;—on one side love of a volcanic character. As a fact—there can be no dispute about it,—this young lady took the extreme measure of running away from home and placing herself under the protection of my client, before the marriage. Please do not interrupt me. I have no wish to dwell upon this, or in any way exaggerate its importance. I may have to refer to it again probably in due course. All that is necessary to tell your lordship and gentlemen of the jury now is that my client regularized the situation as soon as possible—by the marriage."

The blood had rushed to Claire's face, and instinctively she hid it in her hands. Sir James was on his feet protesting. For a little while he and Mr. Moberley and the judge all seemed to be talking together. She raised her head, compressed her lips, and tried to catch every word. The judge was talking alone now—speaking of his horror of allowing the issues to be widened in all directions, and his equal horror of shutting out matters relevant and essential to one's adequate comprehension. He reminded them that the time at their disposal could not be treated as limitless. But on the whole, he confessed that he did not see how, if you are telling a story, you can be prevented from starting it at the beginning.

Then Mr. Moberley went on again. He said that before the case was over, there might also be an attempt to

create prejudice by the hint that the husband had wilfully dissipated the wife's fortune. Again nothing could be further from the truth. He was a man of indomitable energy and untiring industry. He passed from one enterprise to another, never sparing himself, actuated always by the same motive—to maintain his wife in the position of luxurious comfort to which she was accustomed; to give her all the good things of this world. His enterprises were unfortunate. But a husband's misfortune did not supply a reason or an excuse for a wife to forget or break the vows to which she was solemnly sworn. No, certainly not. Misfortune should have drawn them together rather than pushed them apart. As the prayer book says, it is for better, for worse.

Why then—he asked again—had this marriage come to ruin and grief? He had no hesitation in tracing the failure to the temperament of the wife; he had no fear of any kind in endeavouring to show, and to ask them to adopt the view, that no other explanation of the failure was possible.

During the absence of the husband fighting for his country or on public service, the wife, in a fine-lady sort of way, did war work. As his lordship and the gentlemen of the jury knew perfectly well, there was war work and war work. Some people gave their all, including life itself; others filled in their idle hours with occasional assistance to the great cause. Mrs. Vaughan, with other fashionable ladies, assisted off and on at a hospital—at a hospital in Arlington Street instituted by the Countess of Pevensea.

"Here she met a young attractive officer—the co-respondent. I have said 'met him.' But in fact they had met before. He was a friend of her relatives. They had been acquainted in youth. Perhaps it may be thought that they had been boy and girl sweethearts. I do not make the suggestion. I do not make any suggestions of that kind. At any rate, life had separated them, and they met again

—renewed acquaintance—under these romantic circumstances.

"It was evident to the minds of all observers that an immense sympathy appeared to have arisen between them. They were never tired of talking to one another. They had their little jokes and confidences in which others might not share." He would prove that her attendance at the hospital at once became more assiduous. The attendance book would show every date. He would call witnesses to show that she knew no weariness in attending to this particular patient. In due course all this watchful care had its reward. The gallant young soldier was put upon his legs and fit to leave the hospital. He left it.

And then what happened? *Mrs. Vaughan never did an hour's duty at the hospital again.* Never crossed the threshold—never went there at all—not once! Really he must pause for a moment to dwell on this. He could not go rushing on, because it all did seem to him so extraordinarily difficult to explain except in one way. You had this significant series of facts. Until Colonel Everett is admitted to the hospital Mrs. Vaughan goes there, we will not say once in a blue moon, but perhaps once or twice in a week, with sometimes long intervals between the weeks. Colonel Everett arrives on the scene, and it is not a question of her visits being rather more frequent; she goes there every day. She is there every day, *and all night too.* For eight or nine or even ten nights running she is there. Then —*then* Colonel Everett is discharged from the hospital, and the hospital never sees her again.

After saying this he paused, opened his hands, and stared at the jury with a helpless expression, as of a man staggered by the bigness of the phenomenon that faced him. Then he smiled. "Very well, we will leave it at that. She does not go there again. No, her interest in all the good work done at that hospital has vanished."

And he went on to say one might suppose that, the

link between nurse and patient being now broken by the complete cure of the latter, this lady and gentleman would see no more of each other. On the contrary. The affection between them led to many meetings. And this was to be noted. All who saw them together appear to have detected the affection. Their mutual manner drew attention. If they were making any effort to conceal the attraction that each exercised over the other, they were unsuccessful. He had a mass of evidence to present in support of what he was saying, and in its proper sequence he would present it.

He said he came now to a part of the case which he might call the psychological part of the case. There was a female relative of the respondent, a spinster aunt, a Miss Graham; and without scruple he described her as a very sinister influence—an influence that to his mind had played a large part in weaving the tragic overthrow of all these lives.

Then he gave a sketch of Aunt Agnes as a woman of such advanced views that she was prepared to go to all lengths in the subversal of our present social system. She was a woman without a shred of religion, if she was not an avowed atheist. She belonged to societies whose sole aim was to shatter what they termed the old-fashioned code of ethics that governed ordinary citizens. If she did not actually advocate the introduction of free love, she at least denounced the trammels of our marriage law. And he quoted words from a memorial to a secretary of state which Miss Graham and many other people had signed.

. . . "I suggest that if a young woman was in danger of having her principles sapped and her virtue undermined, there would be no more dangerous companion—no companion more likely to throw her weight into the scale of passion as against the scale of law and order, and push her niece over the brink. As a matter of indisputable fact, the young woman and the old woman were at this time

almost constant companions. Miss Graham was far too shrewd a person not to see what was going on under her nose; and my suggestion, my contention is that she approved and abetted. She acted as go-between. Not as dupe. Far from it. *She* knew; and I think that as men of the world you, with me, will draw the plain inference that she perfectly understood how it all would end, she wished it so to end, she meant it so to end."

And he went on to say that in establishing misconduct of the character alleged, you have to consider a normal process of Inclination towards the lawless love, Infidelity in thought towards the husband, Infidelity in deed. "When you have the two former, the next thing you have to look for is *Opportunity*." He should show that the opportunity existed. He should ask them to find that the opportunity was availed of; that this miguided lady—this ardent young woman, driven by her own temperament, egged on and abetted by one who ought to have known better, did pass from the realm of merely longing and craving to the full satisfaction of her desire—from the thought of guilt to the fact of guilt. In regard to the two dates on which specific acts of misconduct were alleged to have been committed at the house in Brighton and at the co-respondent's private chambers in London, he believed there would be no getting away from it.

And Claire thought, with a hot throbbing in her brain: "He said all that about *me*. He is not talking of some poor fallen creature that I read of in a book. He used those words in speaking of *me*." She knew now, better than the old solicitor could explain it, the meaning of "the divorce court atmosphere." It was through that medium that those twelve men over there were looking at her. Through its foully-laden waves all these words came to their ears. Because of its slowly gyrating particles always moving round and round this dusty shadowy well, into which the sunlight never pierced and no breath of pure

air ever came, vague, unsubstantial things and solid, immovable things were all alike. Nothing seen in it could preserve its natural aspect and proportions; all must be distorted and fantastic.

While the blood continued to beat against her temples, she ceased to listen. She thought of quite unimportant things. This morning there had been many more people in court than yesterday; and now she knew that it was full to overflowing. Not once had she looked round; but she could feel close-pressed ranks a little way behind her. There were women there. To her right a small crowd blocked the floor. A benevolent-looking man in a grey suit, grey-haired, elderly, standing near the book-case by the clock, kept smiling and nodding his head approvingly at each point made in the counsel's speech. Claire's attention was fascinated by him. He was there, a long time. Then in a moment he was gone. Claire began to listen again.

Mr. Moberley was finishing a dissertation on Familiarities. By familiarities, he explained, he did not mean indecencies. No, he meant only what he had already referred to. He meant the outward signs of regard. He meant those indications of a too friendly relation that you quite legitimately sought for when you were asking yourself whether or not an illicit intercourse in truth existed. When you notice smoke you know there is fire. When you see straws all going in one direction you know which way the wind is blowing. Well, that was so in regard to this lady and gentleman. Wherever they went—in London or at the seaside—and it was to be remarked that the old woman was generally with them—gentlemen of the jury already knew what to make of her—"She is the Martha and the Mephistopheles of the drama rolled into one"—wherever these two and their shadow were seen, the indications were observed, suspicion was aroused. Yes, lots of smoke; any quantity of straws.

Here was an instance—perhaps it was as striking an instance as you could expect to encounter. A doctor is called into the house and meets these two people for the first time. He has never seen them before—has never heard of their existence till a few hours before. He goes there and is received by them; and at once mistakes them for husband and wife. From his observation of the familiarities passing between them he assumes that that is the relation, that it cannot be any other relation, and he so addresses them. There are other people present. They all notice the doctor's mistake. But now is not this natural assumption of the doctor's very remarkable in one way—very *striking*, as has been said? The more significant, the more you think of it. Physicians—he is a physician—a very well-known physician—highly trained and eminent physicians do not make mistakes of that sort without good cause. The faculty of *diagnosis* is their strongest force. To use the colloquial term, they "size up" a situation with astounding perspicuity. Well, that is how he sizes up this situation. He sees this man and this woman, and sizes them up as husband and wife. Can't be anything else—going on as they are. Really famous physician—no secret about his name—Dr. Rice-Wilcox—probably known to many people in court—now here—or coming here—to tell his lordship and gentlemen of the jury in his own words just what happened.

And again Claire ceased to listen. Her shame and distress had passed into a deeper pain. The doctor's name had evoked swift pictures of that terrible night when reason itself left her in the agony of her loss. For a time now her thoughts revolved on a wheel of torture. Memories that had seemed almost dead sprang into burning life and wrapped her in flame.

When she listened again Mr. Moberley was talking about Roddy.

He was saying that so far Roddy had no suspicions of

any impropriety between his wife and the co-respondent. Roddy did not know the co-respondent, could not remember ever to have heard of him. But what he did know, what he was loth to recognize and for a lengthy period struggled not to believe—was the coldness and neglect to which his wife began to subject him.

Listening now to this fantastic and preposterous story of her own life, Claire had the sensation that the speaker possessed a supernatural knowledge of its minutest details. Knowing all, he was choosing his materials and warping and twisting them to his purpose with diabolical ingenuity. Everything he said was utterly false and yet it sounded true. So abominably true, even to her ear, that she herself had to fight the illusion of its being a fairly accurate statement of events.

Things, he said, had come to such a pass before Roddy left for America, that some vague general suspicion did at last enter the husband's mind, and on the eve of departure Roddy charged her with her lack of affection for him, and asked her this specific question: Why had she turned against him? As she returned an evasive or unsatisfactory answer, he asked her in the most solemn manner a further question. Had she allowed anybody else to enter into her life and take his place? And she had then given him a solemn assurance that there was nobody else, and there never would be anybody else.

Roddy had frankly accepted her assurance and had gone away with as light a heart as a man can be expected to carry in the circumstances—that was to say, when a man is leaving his home and country, to cross the waste of ocean, and undertake hardship and toil in a distant land. At any rate, his suspicions were lulled and allayed. He had not that added burden of care on his shoulders. He was willing to believe—he *did* believe that his honour was safe in his wife's hands.

Then, as if in a dream, Claire heard how his suspicion was again stirred; how when he returned to England they

had met by appointment and sat together in Hyde Park; and how on this occasion "she had made a communication to him." She heard how she had voluntarily confessed that a man had now entered her life, and how she had praised this man in quite extravagant terms as being the noblest of his kind, speaking wildly and recklessly of her gratitude to this man for the kindness he had shown her. Roddy—as Mr. Moberley narrated—had sat crushed and silent, not knowing what to say or do; but suffering greatly under the revelation of her state of mind, and objecting in every part of him to the excessive praise and all the rest of it. After a while he had asked her if she would have any objection to telling him the name of this man. She had replied that it was Colonel Everett. And that was the first time, to the best of his recollection, that Roddy had ever heard the name of the man who wronged him —or let us say, if counsel for Mrs. Vaughan and Colonel Everett both prefer it,—the man that Roddy now firmly believes has wronged him.

So the story went on. It had already lasted hours. Now it was going on again after the interval, and drawing slowly towards its conclusion. The gentlemen of the jury looked flushed and drowsy after their repast. Mr. Moberley himself was warm and rather breathless; but he seemed to be brimming over with confidence in the righteousness of his cause. He turned here and there showing his broad, ingratiating smile as if assured of the sympathy, the friendly regard, of everybody in court. His tone to the jury had become that of a life-long companion; his nods and asides to them seemed to imply an almost telepathic understanding between him and them. He and they were men of the world putting their heads together; they were birds too old to be caught with chaff. And every now and then, as Sir James had foretold, he did a little acting for them. It was execrably bad acting, but it was good enough for the audience and the place.

He had come now to what he would call "the Brighton

incident," and he told it with increased vigour. "Here and everywhere else it is the same thing—something unusual instantly observed, questions asked, doubt engendered. The servants of the house knew Mrs. Vaughan as an indolent, purposeless individual, loiling through the days over a novel, scarcely able to take the trouble to go for a walk on the Parade with the old woman. She does not care what she eats or when she eats: she is a picture of *ennui*. Then in a moment they see her as a changed person: she has come to life. Why? The announcement is made that a male visitor is expected, and that nothing is too good for him. He is to be feasted and fêted—the richest food, the choicest wine must be procured. You will be told how Mrs. Vaughan with her own hands arranged the bedchamber for this masculine guest, decking it with costly flowers, fussing in and out to add further touches of adornment.

"The visitor arrives. It is Colonel Everett, of course; and immediately these two girls are set wondering. The quiet, indolent Mrs. Vaughan and the Colonel laugh and chaff and carry on in a way these girls don't understand. Now, that first night of the visit, the night of Saturday, August the twenty-third, one of the girls, Alice Pink, makes a startling discovery. She has been out for a little relaxation with friends, and, owing to unforeseen circumstances is prevented from returning to the house till a late hour—about eleven o'clock, to be accurate—a late hour for the seaside. Everybody has long since gone to bed; the house is in darkness."

And he described how Alice Pink had discovered Mrs. Vaughan and Colonel Everett alone together in the dark, in a room on the ground floor. Alice Pink would herself describe their position in the room, their confusion on being discovered, and so on; he merely wished to lay sufficient stress on the fact itself. Then he did a little more acting: assuming his heavy, puzzled expression. How *could* one explain the thing? It did seem to him so as-

tounding, so amazing. A darkened room. A room without any light. Eleven o'clock, and everybody else safe in bed. How could you understand two people in their walk of life so compromising themselves by such incredible behaviour? Alice Pink could not at any rate understand it.

That, one might say, was Act I. of "the Brighton incident." Act II. occurred next day. Late in the day the old woman was taken ill and put to bed, in charge of a sick nurse. What do these two people do? Do they sit by the sick bed and show solicitude? No, they have a whispered meal together and then go for a moonlight ramble together. Whatever you may think of this old woman, she is a faithful friend to them; she is, moreover, their hostess. She is seriously ill; she has been stricken down with the illness of which not long afterward she died. One might expect that they would show some ordinary good feeling towards her. But no—not a sign of it. How are you to explain this callousness except in one way? Well, notoriously, people can be very selfish when under the influence of an absorbing passion. They are thinking so much about themselves that they can think very little about anybody else.

That same night, at an advanced hour, say, about midnight, the second discovery is made. The other girl, Miss May Wilding, has been out for relaxation; and on her way upstairs to her bed at the top of the house she notices that the door of Mrs. Vaughan's room is open. She goes into the room. Mrs. Vaughan is not there. She will relate in her own words the steps she took to ascertain where Mrs. Vaughan was, and the irresistible conclusion at which she arrived. It was, he said, a very terrible discovery for a young, innocent girl to make. It almost unnerved her. She went straight to the apartment which she shared with Alice Pink, woke her companion, and reported what she had discovered. Natural sleep was impossible for either of them after that; and in turn, from time to time during the night, they cautiously descended the stairs to ascertain

if Mrs. Vaughan had yet returned to her room. She had not returned to it at 3 a.m. She had not returned to it at 4.30 a.m. It was then daylight, and the watchers were afraid to watch any longer.

He said he could not conceive a more distressing situation for two young girls to find themselves in. They were highly respectable girls and they had their characters to think of. If this sort of thing was going on in the house, it was not a house that they wished to stay in. On the other hand, they ran a fearful risk in denouncing a lady of position like Mrs. Vaughan, a person belonging to the upper circles, probably with powerful friends and far-reaching influence. They debated the matter; and they had the courage to decide that, no matter what the risk, they would intimate to their employer that either these lodgers must be turned out of the house, or they themselves must go. And they had the fortitude to carry out their resolution. They spoke to the landlady the first thing in the morning.

As a result, unquestionably, the thing would have happened. These people—this colonel and this fashionable lady—would have been turned into the street, had they not been too quick for any action on the part of the landlady. But now what happens? This is Act III. of the Brighton incident, and he could not see any possible explanation for such incredible occurrences except the simple and obvious one that these two people have taken alarm; they have heard the footfall of those nocturnal watchers outside the Colonel's door; they know that they are discovered. "Anyhow, this is how they act. They go of their own accord. They have the old woman dragged out of bed—she agrees, of course—she would agree to anything—especially if they have told her of their alarm—and they rush her back to London. Before you can look round, the house is empty. The whole party has disappeared. The rent is forfeited, the uneaten food is abandoned. They have flown. The nurse—a woman of experience in her

profession—will tell you she was never more astonished in her life than when she heard the rapid orders that were being given, and learned that the patient was to be roused for a railway journey and that she herself was dismissed from the case." That was the Brighton incident, and, as he had said before, he did not for the life of him see how you were going to get round it.

He came now to what he would call "The Flat Episode"—the second of the specified dates—and he rattled through this with breathless determination. On that date, Mrs. Vaughan, totally unaccompanied, went to the co-respondent's rooms in St. James's. But she was now under observation; she was being watched, not by mere well-meaning amateurs like May and Alice, but by experts. He would prove that she entered the building at thirteen minutes past three in the afternoon and that she had not yet left the building at five o'clock on the following morning. He enlarged briefly on the generally accepted opinion that a self-respecting female, no matter what her social status, cannot, without the grossest defiance of propriety, visit one of these houses occupied solely by men, even if she comes out again two minutes afterwards. For the rest he seemed to think that he could safely leave "the Flat Episode" to take care of itself.

Then he reached his peroration. He told the jury that he did not at all minimize the gravity of the consequences to this woman if their findings were what he anticipated and asked for. To a person in her social position the punishment would be very severe. He had no doubt that his learned friend would bring all that to their minds with great eloquence. His learned friend was always eloquent. He himself had no gifts of rhetoric or oratory and he had often regretted his deficiency, but, perhaps, never less than on the present occasion; because it seemed to him that when you had a plain, straightforward case the less you dressed it up the better. Well, then, the jury must not shrink from their duty, however painful it might be. As

his lordship would tell them, you cannot have one law for the rich and another for the poor. They must deal with this lady—this fashionable, highly-placed lady—just exactly as if she was the wife of the butcher, the baker, or the candlestickmaker.

Next minute Roddy was being sworn. He stood there, bold and shameless; dressed in new clothes, with his hair freshly cut and singed, and an expression of injury and resentment on his naturally truculent face.

To begin with, Mr. Moberley asked him questions about himself, about his having fought in the late war and his having served with distinction in the war before that —questions designed to show what a fine fellow he was generally; and, in reply, Roddy bowed very slightly and murmured an affirmative.

Then, with the assistance of Mr. Moberley, he repeated his own part of that long story to which everybody had just been listening. He spoke now resolutely and aggressively, scowling and flushing as he uttered the co-respondent's name. And from time to time he turned his eyes to Claire, and looked at her implacably before answering another question.

Did he believe what he was saying? Claire, who knew every intonation of the dreaded voice, wondered if, after all, he really believed. She knew, at least, that his jealousy was genuinely aroused, and that his anger against Basil Everett was real and not simulated. His mastery over her had been disputed, and at all costs he desired to re-assert it. She knew with absolute certainty that it was no longer merely her money that he craved for; he wanted revenge and victory. To that extent he wanted her herself. He was ready, as he had told her, to begin all over again, and in the extremity of her disgust she almost fainted as she thought of it.

"Use your smelling-salts," said Leonard, watching her.

In cross-examination Sir James made himself un-

pleasant to Roddy as he possibly could; but on the whole Roddy remained unshaken, and the feeling of all hearers was that no good had been done. Under Sir James, Roddy became more aggressive; he shrugged his shoulders and smiled contemptuously when driven into corners, and he came out of them noisily. Dick Collie and Leonard Joyce both thought that Sir James went on too long. The more sharply Roddy was goaded, the more clearly he seemed to convey that essential impression of the strong, indignant male whose rights have been assailed by another male. He was very briefly re-examined by Mr. Moberley.

That was the end of the second day. As Claire drove away in Leonard's car she saw the posters of the evening papers, with "*The Vaughan Divorce Case*" in enormous letters. The Vaughans, commonplace as was their predicament, had caught the popular taste. Henceforth they would be given all the space necessary, whatever else might be crowded out.

It was a miserable dinner at Hague House; with Mrs. Gilmour's face like a tragic mask, with Leonard silently making grimaces at the table cloth, with even Belton unable to keep up pretences and so nervous that he broke a glass. After the others had gone Mrs. Gilmour wept on her daughter's neck.

"Oh, Claire, my poor, unhappy child, that I should have lived to see this day! But I must be brave for your sake. Oh, that man, that Moberley! Why did Sir James let him have such license? Why couldn't he stop him? Claire, I do not like Sir James—and what is more, I do not trust him. Now go to bed and try to sleep."

Claire did not sleep. She felt as if she would never sleep again. She had told her mother that she wanted to have her things taken back to Hans Place in the morning. She could not again meet their faces at the dinner table. It would be easier to suffer in solitude.

CHAPTER XXXII

NEXT morning the corridor outside the court was already so full of people that Leonard had difficulty in conducting Claire through the crowd. The uniformed attendants were keeping the doors locked, but they opened them for Claire. Everyone knew her by sight now. All the principals and their companions had become familiar to the eye. At the solicitors' table it was like the reassembling of a desolate sort of house-party. Each guest knew where to sit; and before each place the appropriate bags and piles of papers were being laid out by clerks, as attentive to one's comfort as well-trained footmen.

All that day and most of the next day, the slow procession of witnesses continued; and in every hour Claire felt the horror of it deepening. It was like a nightmare.

Everybody that she had ever known, as it seemed, was paraded here to aid in her destruction. Quite meaningless people who had flitted past on the vague background of her life rose like ghosts to recall themselves to her memory for a moment, denounced her, and disappeared. People that she had instinctively disliked, people that she had been rather fond of, people to whom she had never spoken —it was all the same: few or many words of the same abominable purport.

Here one after another were people from that hospital, armed with books and forms, reciting over again the fact of her sudden increase of attendances; saying how they had all talked about her behind her back, how they had heard her laughing with Basil, how he had been always asking for her.

Here—most absurd and fantastic—was a real friend, Mrs. Morris, the Edgware Road lodging-house keeper;

but instead of talking about the hot water pipes or the bit of cold mutton which would make a hash, telling them details of the doctor's mistake; how she had heard the doctor address the Colonel as Mrs. Vaughan's husband; and how she had thought the error was due to the Colonel standing with his arm round Mrs. Vaughan's waist and Mrs. Vaughan addressing him by his christian name.

Then—monstrous and incredible—it was Pope. Yes, here was Mrs. Emma Dent, the wife of a soldier, formerly Miss Pope and lady's maid to Mrs. Vaughan; reluctantly saying it all over again.

Then it was Doctor Rice-Wilcox, protesting against being dragged here to his great inconvenience with nothing of the slightest importance to say, and yet, nevertheless, saying it all once more. He denied any power of diagnosis or sizing up in such a connection; told Sir James that his mistake was the most natural mistake in the world, that he might make a similar mistake to-day, to-morrow, or the day after. Perhaps had sized up people wrongly a hundred times in his career. But then immediately afterwards he had to tell Mr. Moberley that perhaps the mistake, such as it was, was based on those two facts—arm round waist and use of christian name.

These three witnesses were alike reluctant; they had been forced to come here against their will; they obviously wished well to Claire, and for that reason did her the more harm.

She herself did not hear the doctor's evidence. At sight of him a paralysis of logical thought had swiftly fallen upon her. She could only see his greyness and his quiet intentness; his black coat and his cameo tie-pin. The pain of that dark time was burning her throat and tearing at her heart.

All day long—and part of the next day.

They have reached the Brighton incident now, and maps and plans are handed about, and called for, and mislaid.

The position of the rooms, the slope of the staircase, the number of doors on each floor, all must be understood to enable you properly to grasp what the witnesses are saying.

The Brighton incident unfolds itself briskly under the control of Mr. Moberley. One after the other we have the two young ladies. Alice Pink, wearing a soft yellow straw hat on the back of her head, with grey jacket and skirt, puts her hands, in white cotton gloves, over the ledge of the witness box and twitches her fingers as she relates how, when she entered the darkened dining-room, Mrs. Vaughan was close to the sofa by the book-case and the Colonel stooping over her; how they both "stepped aside like" in much confusion of spirit; how she had noticed an electric torch among the Colonel's things in his dressing-bag, and how she had seen it again in Mrs. Vaughan's room.

May Wilding, in a blue jumper and a white chip-straw hat trimmed with black ribbon and a sea-gull's wing, carries black gloves which she twists in her hands while she tells of the measures she took to ascertain that Mrs. Vaughan, missing from her own room, was not in the drawing-room, was not in this room or in that room, could not be in any room except that room on the second floor—the one room of the house that she had no business to be in.

Mr. Moberley is very suave and courteous to these two witnesses, treating them as very nice young ladies, calling them Miss Pink and Miss Wilding, although he always calls poor Aunt Agnes "the old woman." "Take your time, Miss Wilding. Just tell it in your own words;" and so on.

Sir James, of course, is unpleasant to them. He makes them look foolish, uncomfortable, miserable; shows them as the two common little sluts that they are; but on the whole their evidence stands. The story has not yet been shaken.

Then Miss Newman, the genteelly incompetent landlady,

tells of the communication made to her by her two maids, May and Alice, of her genteel inability to cope with such a situation, and her genteel relief of mind when the problem was solved for her by the abrupt departure of her lodgers. She would far rather speak of the old rectory, with its associations of forfeited grandeur, and tries to do so, but is checked.

Sir James interposing, she is told by the judge that she may say a statement was made to her by the servants, but must not say what they stated. On this she says it again, and being again called to order becomes grievously confused. In cross-examination Sir James scores a distinct success with her. She tells him that she did hear the doctor say that Miss Graham wished to go, and the departure may not, therefore, have surprised her at the time, but only have surprisesd her at a later period. Perhaps only when she heard it talked about in connection with this case. Sir James, it is felt, has done well with this witness.

But his great effort is in cross-examination of the nurse. The nurse has recounted her impression of the too friendly behaviour of the colonel and the lady, has given her version of the hasty departure and the cruelty of taking her patient on a journey, and Sir James puts it to her that her notion of the patient's state is founded on guess-work, because she was asleep all night, and that Mrs. Vaughan sat in the room doing her duty for her. He reminds her that her first words on entering the house were to say that she was dead-beat and in sore need of sleep; but she utterly repudiates these imputations. Asleep on duty! What next, she would like to know!

Mr. Moberley has fought Sir James in her defence to save her from these odious aspersions; he protests against the line of cross-examination as outrageous and unfair. Questions not arising out of her tale! He, too, would like to know what next. His lordship, however, does not quite

see how he is to stop Sir James. This is one of many similar squabbles between counsel about what is relevant and admissible. Now his lordship seems to feel he has already let in so much that it is too late to try to keep anything out. And thus it is henceforth; no one is stopped, nothing is forbidden; time is forgotten.

Sir James continues his tussle with the nurse; but with obstinate tenacity she holds her ground. Forced to recount her previous fatigues, she makes light of them, vows that when she arrived in Schomburg Square she could have kept awake for another week if necessary. She says that Sir James does not know what it would mean for a night-nurse to fall asleep. Sir James says he knows perfectly well, and declares that for his part he would think nothing of it. If he himself had been as tired as she, he would have certainly yielded to slumber and would not have been ashamed to say so.

"Ah, but you are not a nurse."

And there is laughter.

"Suppose I tell you that Mrs. Vaughan is going to prove with the most startling certainty that she was in fact in the room and watched you sleeping for hour after hour?"

"I shouldn't believe it. Because she wasn't there."

Then he cautioned her, telling her to be very careful.

"If she had been there I should have seen her. She wasn't there."

Pressed to admit that she knew perfectly well that Miss Graham was fit to travel, she says, "Certainly not," with obstinate determination.

"Did you not hear the doctor say so?"

"No, never."

"Did you not hear him tell Miss Newman that the patient was fit to travel?"

"Of course I didn't. Why should he tell Miss Newman when *I* was there? If he had said so to anyone, he would

have said so to me." She seems offended and angry at the notion of such a breach of etiquette.

She sticks to her point, too, and will not be drawn into entanglements. Throughout the long tussle one can recognize the mental attitude of the woman who would die rather than withdraw anything.

". . . I wasn't asleep. . . . I say I wasn't sleeping."

"You think it is impossible to drop asleep without meaning to?"

"I don't say I mightn't close an eye; but this is a question of being asleep for hours. Yes, I do say it's impossible."

"You realize the importance of all this?" asked Sir James, in his most tremendous manner.

He was majestic and awe-inspiring, with grave significant glances at the jury, and with a tone and gesture of supreme contempt as he echoed the witness's answers; but the nurse looked at him squarely, and showed no fear of him.

In re-examination Mr. Moberley was brief and effective.

"You have no interest in this case?"

"None whatever," said the nurse firmly; and Mr. Moberley smiled at the jury.

So it went on. Claire, looking up after another lapse of attention, saw standing in the witness box that hall porter, wearing the same apple-green coat with the wound stripes on the sleeve. He told how she had tried to escape notice by hurrying up the staircase, and how he had called her back and taken her up in the lift to the Colonel's rooms. He was on duty till one a.m., and he did not see her go out; if she had gone out again he must have seen her go out. After one a.m. she would have to get some one to let her out with a key. The Colonel had such a key.

Then one after another came the men who had watched outside the building.

It was worse than a dream; because the horror of it, instead of rising and falling in force as happens in dreams, was steadily cumulative. A diabolical, merciless logic governed its slowly developing phases. Each ghostly face seen, every wild word spoken, increased the torment of it and seemed to push one a little nearer to the inexorable word of doom. She felt "I shall go mad if I go on thinking of it like this;" and she had an instantaneous sense of relief each time that she allowed her thoughts to wander.

She noticed trivial details of the court itself, studied the sordid scene, glanced at the frequently changing faces of the crowd on her right hand. With absorbed interest she watched an elderly usher who had been told by the judge to take a glass of water to one of the counsel. He hunted for a glass in a little cupboard in the book-case facing the solicitors' table. A bunch of keys hung from the lock of the cupboard door, and she wondered to what receptacles they all belonged. Then again she tore herself from these trifles to the terrible main fact. She was on trial for more than life, and things were going against her.

Those people going in and out seemed to her the great public. They were her real judges, the people who hear only a few words and say, "That's enough for me. She's guilty."

All at once Mr. Moberley announced that this was his case.

She began to breathe more freely as she listened to the speech of Sir James. Her belief that in this place the truth must triumph had gone utterly, but her courage and her hope revived as the friendly voice vibrated behind her back and the comforting words fell warm upon her ears. This was the sort of thing that she had wanted to hear said. This was at once truth and salvation. Yes, she

denied it all with indignation and disgust. Yes, she would go into that box again and tell them the simple unvarnished facts. Yes, yes.

He was saying in effect that the whole thing was a trumped-up accusation. It bore every well-known mark of the artfully concocted tale. He was cautioning the jury against giving ready credence to servants' reckless assumptions—the assumptions of none too nice-minded people. In that court it was notorious that there was no more untrustworthy evidence than the evidence of servants; unless it was the evidence of the people employed by private inquiry agents—people paid by results, people who must find out something or pretend to find out something in order to justify their existence. He was showing how there had been an endeavour to make an effect by multiplying evidence, seeing how weak it was intrinsically. He was pointing out the total absence of incriminating documents. No letters. No telegrams. Not a single line in Claire's handwriting. His voice was vibrating more strongly. Good heavens, if people were to be lightly condemned on unsubstantial charges such as these, what lady in the land would be secure? He was winding up his speech. He was calling on his client to tell them the real story of all these events.

Leonard patted her arm and whispered to her as she moved towards the witness box. "Now, Claire, a brave front!"

Then, in reply to her counsel's questions and faithful to her oath, Claire told them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And that was the end of the fourth day.

On the following morning the crowd was bigger than ever. Guardians at the doors had searching tests of conscience as they found room for people with real business or pocketed half crowns and admitted the pruriently

curious. Barristers in wigs were shepherding fashionably-dressed ladies, squeezing them into the fold with arrogant joviality. A comfortable seat at the Vaughan Divorce Case would pay for a year's hospitality and leave a balance over to one's credit. "How can I ever thank you?" "Not at all." And for to-day, too! *The* day! The lady in the box!

There was a murmur of pleasant anticipation up and down the benches. Experts spoke of Moberley, K.C.—stronger in cross-examination than anything else; more than a bit of a bully; worse with women than men. The slight movements of restless suspense ceased, and the murmuring grew soft. Claire was going up the steps of the witness box. Only the ladies in furs and feathers continued to whisper.

"She's pretty." . . . "Yes, in a *way*." . . . "Tall, isn't she?" . . . "I like her hat." . . . "Yes, she *is* pretty. I see it now. I see the attraction."

"*Silence!*"

Mr. Moberley began very quietly and slowly, picking up the thread at her final answers to Sir James. He told her that last night she had denied all the accusations against her, and asked her if she confirmed her denial this morning; and she said, yes, she did. Then he asked her if in her opinion her conduct with the co-respondent was not even open to suspicion; and she said that she saw no reason to suspect it.

"The evidence is all a tissue of lies?"

"No, I don't say that. A great deal of it is quite true. It is the inference drawn from it that is totally false."

"What do you mean by the inference?"

"Isn't it obvious what she means?" said Sir James.

"Please do not interrupt. I have shown the greatest reticence and indulgence to you." And Mr. Moberley repeated his question.

"I mean the interpretation you are trying to put upon it."

"Oh, don't trouble about my interpretation. Don't, I beg you, trouble about *that*. The gentlemen of the jury and his lordship will attend to *that*. Just answer my questions. . . . You have heard what the servant Alice Pink told us of how she discovered the presence of yourself and the co-respondent in the room on the ground floor after the rest of the party had gone to bed?"

"Yes."

"And you do not deny it?"

"I do not deny the simple fact, but I utterly deny everything else."

"Everything else? But I am not asking you about anything else. I am speaking of the night of August the twenty-third. Please confine your attention to that. Now I will put my question again—and in another form, so that there cannot be any possible misunderstanding. Is the statement of this witness, the servant Pink, correct or not?"

"Yes, it is correct as far as it goes."

"As far as it goes! But it could not go further unless she had been in the room with you from the beginning." And there was a laugh. "Now, please answer my question."

"She *has* answered it."

"No, I want yes or no. I don't want these embroideries and foot-notes and enlargements. Now, Mrs. Vaughan, for the third time. Do you deny this girl's statement of the facts?"

"No."

"Ah, we have got it at last;" and he gave a good-humoured smile of triumph to the jury.

All this was taking time, and already she was feeling the fatigue and strain of it; but she understood perfectly well that it was only sparring. This man *meant* to tire her, to wear her down, to exhaust her strength if he could,

before he got to work. She braced herself to meet the call upon her endurance.

"And as far as you know—I am still speaking of Alice Pink—so far as you know, she could have no reason for inventing things?"

"No."

"So far as you know, she had no grudge or grievance against you?"

"No."

"Now, I want to take you to the night of August the twenty-fourth, the following night—the night of the old lady's illness. You heard the evidence of the second servant—Miss Wilding, the girl May. Now, I want an answer—yes or no, please. Do you really deny the facts to which she has sworn?"

"Well, what facts do you mean?"

"*All* of them. That she entered your room and found that you were absent from it?"

"No, of course I don't deny it."

"You only deny the correctness of her interpretation of your absence?"

"You told her thirty minutes ago not to use the word interpretation."

"Oh, please" and the big, coarse man assumed a most pitiful expression of helpless distress, as he turned to Sir James. "If you cannot restrain yourself—if this outrageous manner is continued—I shall have to ask the protection of his lordship." And he stood for a little while puffing and blowing.

Then he asked innumerable questions about her use of the electric torch given her by Basil. Why had she taken it with her if she was merely crossing the corridor and going into her aunt's room? Was it at all likely that she would require the aid of the torch in an organized sick-room with a night-nurse in charge? Had she taken the torch with her without knowing why she took the torch?

He suggested that she had taken the torch to help her in finding her way silently up the darkened staircase to the room on the second floor.

So it went on. At one point she asked for and was given some water. At a later point Sir James asked that she might be allowed to sit down.

"Is she ill?" asked the judge.

"No, but she has been standing for the better part of three hours."

". . . Now, I am going to ask for a little further enlightenment on some of your replies to my learned friend," and Mr. Moberley turned round to his junior and had a colloquy with him while they both wrestled with their papers. "Oh, cannot you find it? It is the undressing that I want. Ah, Good!" And he turned round again.

"You have said that you first undressed, and then went into your aunt's room." And he asked her questions about her garments. "Come, now, Mrs. Vaughan you need not be shy about it. This is a court of law, you know. Tell us exactly what you were wearing?"

Claire said that she wore her night-dress with only a dressing-gown over it; and he wished to know whether the dressing-gown was a thick one. Why did she walk about the house in her thin dressing-gown? Why didn't she go to her aunt before she undressed? Didn't think of it, perhaps? Was it her custom to undress directly she got into her room?"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so? What on earth do you mean by that?"

And he asked her whether she was not cold while sitting in her aunt's room.

"No."

"You say you sat near the window. Was it open?"

"Yes."

"At the top or the bottom?"

"Both, I think."

"But still you did not feel cold?"

"No."

"You sat there—I am giving your own version—by this open window—open at top and bottom—with no other clothing than what you have described—and that is with very little clothing at all—you sat there hour after hour, and you say you did not feel cold?"

"No. It was a warm night."

"It was a warm night," and he had a loud aside to his junior. "Yes, I think it was, in more senses than one . . . It was a warm night. That is your explanation. Very well, we will leave it at that. For the moment we will leave it at that. Now I want to take you back to the preceding night—the night of the twenty-third. You have told us that after retiring to your room you came down to fetch your book. How long afterwards would that be?"

"Some little time."

"Just so. We know that it was after eleven—because the electric light had been turned off. And we know that you went out of the drawing-room with your aunt at half past ten. According to the witness Alice Pink, it was twenty minutes past eleven when she disturbed you in the downstairs room——"

"She did not disturb us."

"Very good, you were not disturbed. She opened the door of the room, let us say. At eleven-twenty? Would that be correct, as to time?"

"Yes, so far as I know."

"Very well. Then that gives us thirty to forty minutes upstairs in your room. About forty minutes, more or less?"

"Yes."

The spectators listened apathetically. All this was tedious, and the big man was not living up to his reputation. People who had promised that he was rough with

women, knocking them about till they had not a leg to stand on, were ashamed of having made such large promises. He had been funny once or twice, but this was tame.

"Then, after that period of forty minutes, you went down to fetch your book?"

"Yes."

"How were you dressed?"

The judge interposed. "If you mean was she undressed. I asked her that very question myself."

"Oh, please, my lord."

"And she says that she had not undressed on the night of the twenty-third."

"I am perfectly aware of that, my lord."

"Then why did you ask her again?" said Sir James.

"Oh, really, really. In all my experience.—These ceaseless interruptions!"

"I did not mean to interrupt you," said the judge suavely. "I thought you had forgotten my question. I was trying to help you."

"With all deference, my lord, I do not need help. I do not forget things." And he stood there with his helpless expression, or turning to glare at Sir James. "Indeed, I am no neophyte in this court.—More than thirty years.—Pretty well known." Then, after puffing and blowing he simmered down, shook out his hands, and continued:

"You have heard what has passed. Do you adhere to your statement that on this occasion you were fully dressed?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well. Now, Mrs. Vaughan——" And it was to be noticed that as he put his question he turned to the jury and gave them a triumphant stare, really addressing the question to them rather than to the witness. "Will you kindly tell us *why* you weren't undressed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely my meaning is plain? You have given us to understand that on retiring to your room it was your custom to strip at once. Why on this particular night did you depart from your custom and so strangely delay?"

"There—there was nothing strange."

"Oh, *wasn't* there?" He had turned to her again; he stared at her insolently, and there was an affectation of contemptuous forbearingness in his tone. "You know, you can't have it *both* ways, Mrs. Vaughan. You do what seems a queer thing one night, and you tell us to believe it isn't queer because it is a habit of yours. Then when it is shown that you have broken the habit on the previous night, you say that isn't queer either. Can't you find any explanation to give us? . . . Well?"

"No."

"And you see nothing odd—nothing requiring explanation—in this discrepancy?"

"No."

"May I suggest some possible explanations, since you seem so completely as a loss?" And he had an offensive smile. "It was a cold night, perhaps, and you therefore required full clothing? How is that?"

"No."

"No, that won't pass muster—because, as a fact, it was a warmer night than the night that followed. I have put myself to the trouble of ascertaining; and the mean temperature of the former night was higher than the latter."

Claire was deadly white; her eyes glanced round the court as if vainly seeking help. She looked like an aristocrat of the French Revolution fallen into the hands of the people, or a Russian princess among the Bolshevists. The interest of the audience was intense now. They thrilled as they watched.

"Don't look here and there and everywhere, please. Look at me—and give me your close attention. Here is

another explanation. You had a special reason that night for not undressing?"

"No,—none whatever."

"Did you know that Colonel Everett was out of the house and would soon return?"

"Yes, I think I knew that."

"And you had made up your mind to wait there till he came in and then go down and join him?"

"No."

"Since his arrival at the house early in the afternoon, is it not a fact you had never once been alone with him?"

"I don't remember."

"The old woman was there. She had never left you alone, not even for a few minutes. Is that so?"

Claire remained silent.

"*Answer me.*" Of a sudden he had raised his voice, and he spoke brutally; as men do not speak to women, and not to other men unless intolerably provoked. "Answer me."

Ah! It was so sudden and so savage that to many of the audience it seemed exactly as if he had raised his hand and struck her. People drew in their breath, and there was a spasmodic movement all along the benches. The experts felt justified at last. He was getting to work.

"Very well. I suggest to you that you were waiting in your room for an opportunity of getting speech with the co-respondent?"

"It is not true."

"Then I put it to you once more. What *were* you doing? One moment. Don't let's have another misunderstanding. For forty minutes, more or less, you were alone in your own room before you thought of going to bed. You must have been occupied somehow. You were not reading, because you had left your book downstairs. Were you writing letters, sewing, tidying the apartment?"

"No, I think I sat thinking."

"You sat thinking. You are fond of doing that. It seems to be a favourite pastime. All right;" and he smiled. "That is the explanation. This gap of time is filled in so. It is the *only* account you can give of it. You sat thinking. Now," and his manner changed again. "Accepting your account of it, I want to put this to you. Supposing that this man was your lover"——

"He was not my lover."

"Be patient, please. I am merely putting a supposition to you. If you and he had been carrying on a guilty intrigue——"

"I have sworn that we were not."

"Oh, please. I know what you have sworn. I quite understand your attitude. I think everybody in court understands it. According to you, there is nothing in anything, nothing behind anything. But accepting all that for the moment, I ask you to follow me in a hypothesis. You have plenty of imagination. You can have no difficulty in following me. I will put it this way: Suppose it was another woman in your place, a faithless wife awaiting her lover. The lover arrives, but the presence of a third party prevents any confidential talk between them, prevents their making *arrangements*. Would she not probably have waited upstairs exactly as you did, then hurried down to the lover at the first opportunity, made all arrangements with him for the gratification of their passion, and then, *and not till then*, have returned and disrobed herself? And would she not have been found absent from her room on the following night exactly as you were? Well?"

"I cannot answer," said Claire proudly. "I know nothing of how such a person would act."

"But you do see what I mean? How very simple it all seems if for a moment one assumes guilt. Do you see that?"

"I see what you are trying to insinuate."

"No, no, I insinuate nothing. Come, Mrs. Vaughan, aren't you tired of fencing with me? You are a very clever lady—you cannot really fail to understand that I am merely putting a hypothetical case. Now, don't you see that under this assumption the facts all drop into their places by themselves, there is no difficulty in explaining them, no draft on one's credulity anywhere required?"

"Yes, I understand your assumption."

"Then, if the facts are so susceptible of this complexion, you cannot continue to treat the accusations based on them as wild and ridiculous?"

"No, I don't agree."

"Oh, surely? You cannot any longer blame people for drawing their own conclusions, erroneous though they may be? Human nature being what it is, they cannot all be blamed?"

"I have not blamed all of them."

"There can be no necessity to find ulterior motives for their forming their opinion?"

"No."

"No necessity for the tissue of lies theory, conspiracy, attempt to wreck you, and so forth?"

"I suppose not," said Claire wearily.

"Good. Well, I am glad we are agreed on that point," and he drew a long breath. "We have cleared the air in regard to that. We shall get on together much better for having got *that* out of the way."

Then he resumed an easy confidential tone as he started something else.

So it went on all day. Sometimes Claire felt as if she had been stripped naked by these brutes and was being publicly flogged to death. Sometimes she cast despairing glances at Basil Everett, whose yearning eyes never failed to meet her gaze. Sometimes she looked suddenly towards Roddy, as if even *he* must feel pity and be willing to stop this torturing. But it still went on. Once she looked for

aid from Sir James, and found his place empty. He had gone, and she felt that even her paid friends had deserted her.

While he was there he protested and disputed. There were long discussions as to what was admissible; but in the end everything was permitted.

Mr. Moberley had been taking her backwards and forwards through the Flat episode; saying that if for a moment he accepted the amazing explanation of her issue from the building by the back way, past all those domestic offices without being seen, and her return to Hans Place soon after eight p.m., he wished to know how she filled in all the time between. He begged her not to reply that she had sat thinking; and there was more laughter. Now he had taken her back to the beginning of things—her escapade with Roddy. He expressed regret at raking this up. He said he must again touch on this painful part of the story, but he would do so as delicately as possible. His client had chivalrously wished to keep it out altogether, but it was impossible to keep it out. The questions that he was about to put arose directly out of some of her replies to his learned friend; but they were directed to character, and in that sense his lordship might decide to rule them out as irrelevant.

But he himself would not press for the admission of the questions.

And again there was that movement of expectancy, a tenser emotion in the audience.

He asked her about her love for Roddy.

"You were passionately in love with him?"

"No, not passionately."

"Ardently, shall we say?"

"I loved him, in the beginning."

"In the fullest sense of the word. You greatly admired him?"

"Yes, I admired him."

"And for this love you threw over everything. You lived with him before marriage?"

In the absence of Sir James her junior counsel rose and fought for her gamely. But Mr. Moberley was able to go on.

"Believe me, Mrs. Vaughan," he said, "I do not allude to this first fault of yours——"

Mr. Eaton sprang to his feet again and again protested. He made the big man very angry. Mr. Moberley said he would not be bullied—"not by you or anybody else. I will not submit to bullying. I demand fair play." He was very indignant about it.

Then he put his question in a different form.

"I did not know what I was doing," said Claire.

"Just so. You were simply carried away by your love?"

"No. I——"

"Well?"

"I went to him to get married. He respected me. And I never realized till afterwards that I had put myself in a false position."

Then soon he was asking her about her love, or her regard, for Basil Everett, and she admitted that she admired him.

"Oh, you admired him! That was the start. Well, you have told us what admiration led to in the case of your husband; but on this second occasion you endeavoured to curb it and keep it within bounds? Is that so?"

"It was totally different."

So it went on—backwards and forwards.

"Now you have sworn that throughout your married life there was not any time at which your husband had occasion to impugn your conduct—I mean, of course, in regard to other men. I will read you my learned friend's question and your reply. . . . Now, do you stick to this? . . . I will give you another chance. Search your

memory. Does nothing occur to you that makes it desirable to withdraw or modify that statement of yours?"

"No."

"All right;" and he turned and stared at the jury. "Now answer me, please, with a yes or no;" and he turned to her. "Have you forgotten Evan Giles?"

Claire started in wonder.

"Ah! So you do remember? You know who I mean? The novelist?"

"Yes."

"He is dead now, but during his lifetime you knew him very well?"

"Yes, he was a great friend."

As she said it, the picture of Evan Giles rose before her: so tragically sad, the grey-haired man weeping in the dusty, littered room.

"Now, yes or no, please. No embroidery. Did your husband on a certain occasion forbid you to receive that man at the house again?"

"Well, Mr. Giles had dined with us, and——"

"No, no," he roared. "I will not have it. Yes or no, madam."

"Yes."

"And you promised to obey his wish?"

"Yes."

"Did you later on make a confession to him that in spite of this prohibition you had had Giles to the house?"

"Yes."

"And did his visits in fact continue until they were cut short by something in no way connected with your husband?"

"He came to see me several times."

"And then did not somebody else object—not your husband at all? Yes or no."

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Mrs. Giles."

"Yes, Mrs. Giles, the man's own wife. Why did she object?"

"I believe they were not on the best of terms together."

"Well? Go on."

"I think she was of a jealous disposition."

"Didn't you *know* that she was jealous?"

"Mr. Giles had said so."

"Then soon afterwards he died. Are you aware of the prevailing suspicion that he committed suicide?"

"No."

"Oh, surely? Don't you know there was an inquest?"

"Yes, I know there was an inquest."

"And doubt expressed about his having thrown himself on to the rocks?"

"Yes."

"If so, have you any idea why he committed suicide?"

Claire remained silent. The thing was too monstrous. Again that presentment of the heart-broken man rose before her. She remembered his words about going quietly and no one ever knowing.

"Do you refuse to answer?"

She rallied her strength, looked at her tormentor, and spoke proudly and firmly.

"Yes, I refuse to answer. It is nothing to do with me."

"And it has nothing to do with her," said Sir James cheerfully—"or with this case either." Sir James had come back, and Claire felt a flicker of comfort.

But Mr. Moberley was more indignant than ever. He said Sir James's treatment of him amounted to persecution. It was impossible to collect the threads of one's ideas while being dealt with in such a pitiless fashion. In all his long experience he had never met the like of it. He puffed and blew; and it was a little while before he could compose himself sufficiently to go on again.

The hands of the big clock, as Claire looked at it, seemed to have stopped. The afternoon would never be over.

He had taken her back to the doctor's misconception as to Basil's being her husband; and all at once he spoke of the child. "This was the night the child died."

Claire was trembling, trying to speak.

"My learned friend is wrong," said Sir James. "It was three days before she died."

Mr. Moberley turned on him violently; shouted, spluttered, nearly suffocated. Then, with papers pushed into his hand by his junior, he admitted that he was wrong.

"I beg pardon—I beg pardon—I beg pardon," he said volubly. "Just so. My lord, I admit I was astray. Momentarily I had lapsed. In fact I was wrong. Three days! It is not often that I miss a date. I have a fairly established reputation for accuracy in these cases. But, well, the mind works less surely when fatigued. I am not in my first youth," and he had the same engaging smile, as if certain of the sympathy and affection of all present. "I have been at it since the first thing this morning and the strain tells," and he turned round to his clerk. "Get me my lozenges."

Then he turned to Claire.

"I will not press you as to that episode. Really you have given me all I wanted. I will only ask you this. The child Maudie——"

"Gladys," said Claire, in a whisper.

"What's that? Oh! *Gladys!* Just so. The name is of no consequence. Only the facts matter. The child Gladys, or Maudie, or whatever you call her, was ill and in danger of death. . . ."

Claire had broken down in tears. She sat, with her arms stretched forward across the ledge of the box and her head upon her arms, weeping. All eyes were on her. People all along the benches leaned forward fascinated by

the picture; they closely watched the black hat bowed down and the heaving of the frail shoulders. For a little while one heard nothing but her convulsive sobbing.

"Take your time," said Mr. Moberley, with good humour; and he sat down and began to suck his lozenges.

As soon as she was ready he went on again. But Claire was without the least force of resistance now; she had been broken by that last brutal allusion to the dying child—"Gladys or Maudie or whatever you call her." It was the last screw of the rack. She looked half crazed and answered distractedly.

Soon he was making her say whatever he pleased. She confessed that words of love had once passed between Basil and herself; she said she had told Basil that she loved him; she said that if this was wrong she could not help it. She said whatever the inquisitor wanted her to say. She was at his mercy. And he had none.

Next morning they brought her there again for re-examination by Sir James; and she stood with white cheeks and red rims about her eyes, making all the ladies whisper. Sir James did what he could for her. But she was like the shattered subject fetched out of the dungeon and brought before the inquisitors once more; not knowing friends from foes now, not knowing whether she recants or confirms a vow.

"I should take her out of court," said Sir James, leaning over and touching Leonard's shoulder. "Take her home. She won't be wanted again. Not to-day, at any rate."

That evening and the evening of the following day the newspaper reports were full of "sensations" and "laughter." Some of Claire's witness caused great merriment; more especially her mother, who wandered round and round the witness box, would speak to the judge as "Sir Henry;" and when asked to consider him merely in

his official capacity, gave him a dignified stare as if mentally removing him for ever from her visiting-list. Uncle Derek provoked mirth, but in a lesser degree, telling how it was only the merest accident that prevented him from accompanying Claire all through "the Flat episode." The late Miss Graham's private maid amused only because she was such a character. The "sensational scenes" were chiefly due to the co-respondent, who stopped his counsel when explaining to the jury that, difficult as it might appear to the lay mind, they could find that Claire had been guilty of misconduct with Basil, but that Basil was innocent of misconduct with Claire. He stopped him again when inviting the jury to give the co-respondent the benefit of any doubt. He was violent under cross-examination, and had to be twice cautioned by the judge because of things he said to Mr. Moberley.

Then, after an adjournment of two days, it was the last day of all. Claire sat in her accustomed place and listened to the judge's summing up. He had started long before luncheon; and he was going on now in exactly the same chatty emotionless style, as if he would never cease.

. . . "I am not going into any further detail on this point, because you have paid such patient attention to the evidence. . . . I am not laying down the law. I am merely putting it all before you. . . . It is for you to say if you believe the evidence on this point. . . . I must say that in my opinion the evidence of the lady on this point was not very candid. . . ."

The merciless deadly chat went on; and Claire felt more than despair, a bitterness worse than death. The truth was nothing in this cursed place. No one could see it; no one could understand it.

. . . "To my mind the key to almost everything is the credibility or not of the nurse. Which are you to believe? One of these two people has to be disbelieved. . . . If you are to believe Mrs. Vaughan's account of the affair

it seems to me that the larger part of the case against her falls to the ground, because everything else must be read in the light that is thrown upon it by this Brighton incident. That's how it seems to me. But it is how it strikes you, not how it strikes me. . . ."

The quiet flood of words poured over her head, drowning her. It had been raining and the streets were full of mud; now a fog had gathered, swallowing the daylight, creeping chilly into all the corridors and halls of the vast building. She had a sensation of the cold, the filth, and the darkness outside these high walls.

. . . "It is a serious allegation to say that a nurse is asleep while on duty. It is like accusing a sentry at his post. . . . The lady says she refrained from waking her. She let her sleep in pity. It is quite conceivable. . . . If the nurse, jealous of her professional repute, has lied to cover her fault. . . . It is for you to decide. . . . It would be a cruel, a wicked thing for her to do, because of the damaging effect on this lady. . . . Gentlemen, it may be extremely difficult for you."

It seemed to her that the fog came through the high windows in long dark swathes; the lamps were burning palely; she was going down in darkness.

. . . "And again, gentlemen, you must apply your own common sense. . . ."

"Now, gentlemen, that is the whole case. You can take all these maps and tracings with you."

The jury had gone, and immediately a new case started. It was an undefended case of no consequence, to be heard without a jury, and it rattled along at a tremendous pace.

This was a love match, counsel told the judge. The petitioner, a temporary officer in the Army, while on leave made the acquaintance of the respondent outside the Piccadilly Circus station; they went away together, and were married two days afterwards. On his return to

France a communication was made to the petitioner by a brother officer. . . .

Nobody listened, nobody cared. The court was as full as ever; but all these people were waiting to hear the verdict of the Vaughan case. This common stuff was quite beneath their notice. They had to wait a long time. Then in a moment the new case was shuffled aside. The door had opened and the jury were filing back into their box.

Someone reading out aloud, as if from the book of doom, asked them if they found that Roddy was guilty of desertion; and they said Yes.

Did they find that he had been guilty of adultery?

Yes.

Did they find that Claire had been guilty of adultery?

Yes.

There was a sound of many footsteps. The crowd was surging out of the court and along the corridor. It was all over. Both petitions had been dismissed. Roddy and Claire remained man and wife.

Leonard hurried her fast through the moving throng and took her out by the Carey Street entrance, where his car was waiting for them. All the way people were recognizing her, pointing at her. Three common women just ahead of them were talking loudly about her; at the entrance they turned, saw her, and as she passed out one of them spoke with noisy scorn.

"There she goes, the ——!"

The obscene word, hurled after her into the fog and mud, made her shrink a little closer to Leonard's arm.

It was the verdict of the gutter, it was the verdict of the world, on a perfectly pure and good woman immolated by our cruel and stupid law.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was the evening now. She was alone, crouching down near the fire, in that room beside the hall where as a child she used to look with admiring wonder at her aunt's pretty things.

The room was quite unchanged, just as she remembered it then. The light flickered warmly on all the familiar objects—the miniatures of gallant old gentlemen in red tunics and delicately tinted ladies in powdered wigs; the blue and white china; the soft coloured bindings of books behind the latticed panes. Only Claire had changed.

She had given agitated orders to the servants that no one was to be admitted to the house, but every now and then she turned her eyes towards the door and listened; for the fear of Roddy was upon her. He would certainly come to her. Perhaps even now he was already coming—somewhere out there in the fog, drawing closer and closer. How could these women-servants keep him out? She crouched lower in the chair, and trembled.

He was still her husband—her master. He could claim her when he pleased. He could do what he liked with her, and no one would save her. That protection of the court, spoken of by Leonard, was gone from her now. It ended with the end of the case.

Presently she heard the electric bell ring, the maid's footstep in the hall, and the sound of a man's voice. She sprang to her feet half mad with fear, drew back to the wall, and stood staring at the door with hands outstretched and shaking. Then her arms dropped to her sides. She had recognized the voice, and it was not Roddy's.

"Say it's all right. Tell her that you don't mind seeing me."

Basil had opened the door of the room, and the maid

was stanchly contesting his entrance. Claire spoke to her, and she left them alone.

"Claire!"

They stood looking at each other. Indeed, they had both of them changed. He was haggard, untidy, throbbing with hot anger—like a soldier on the line of retreat after a reverse to his army, with courage unbroken but hope destroyed. She, wild-eyed, white, limp, shaking, was like a woman just escaped from the enemy after being outraged.

"Why have you come?" And she clung to him, trembling. "You ought not to have come to me."

"Yes, I ought."

"What do you bring? Poison, to put me out of my misery?"

And for a little while they scarcely knew what they were saying.

"Basil, if *he* comes—if he tries to get me back—if he forces me again, I'll kill myself. I'll throw myself from the top of the house—as Evan threw himself upon the rocks. Gladys will know. Gladys will forgive me."

"Hush. He won't come. If he comes now while I am here, I shall kill him. That's why we must get away at once. I shall stop with you till we go. Yes, I shall stop here."

They clung to each other, and grew calmer. Her face all wet with tears was against his face and then sank to his breast; and he held her more tightly, so that she should not slide down to the ground.

"A woman called me a foul name. That's what people think of me. Wherever I go, they will look at me—point at me."

"Nonsense. To-morrow it will be all forgotten."

"And next day it will be somebody else——. That's what you'll say to make me believe. Basil—I—I'm so sorry to have brought this trouble on you."

"Claire, don't—please don't. Come. We'd better go."

Then she released herself from his embrace.

"It's no good. We must say Good-bye. You—you're very kind to me. But, Basil, I won't drag you down to my level. You—you must go on with your career."

"My career is finished."

"No, no. You mustn't say that. You said people will forget. They will, about you. If one drop of bitterness could be added to my cup, it would be to know that I had ruined you."

"Claire!"

"You mustn't throw things over."

"I have done it."

"No."

"It's irrevocable. I am going to Australia. I have taken that man's offer. And you are going with me."

"No. Never."

But he seized her in his arms and spoke with passionate strength. "Claire. Put your arms round my neck. Hold your dear face to mine. Now, who cares? What does anything matter? We have got each other at last."

"Very well," she said finally. "Yes, I can't help it. I give up. I can't, I can't go on. Yes, take me away—hide me from people—save me from other women's eyes. Oh, Basil, why has God been so cruel?"

"Hush."

"Take me with you—take a mistress. Use me—throw me away——"

"Claire—you are breaking my heart."

"I—I'll try to mend it. I'll do anything you say."

"Now shall I stay with you here or take you to my rooms?"

"Take me to your rooms. Take me now. I'm afraid of this house."

Her cloak and hat were on the chair where she had laid them down hours ago. He helped her to put them on, and they went out into the darkness hand in hand.

Exmouth, May, 1919—*Richmond, January,* 1920.

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